

The Moment of Truth



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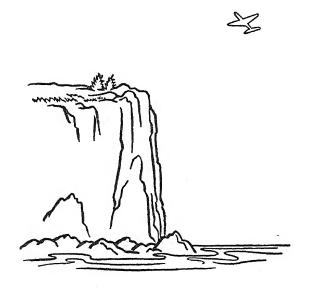
The Moment of Truth

By Storm Jameson

COUSIN HONORÉ
THEN WE SHALL HEAR SINGING
CLOUDLESS MAY
THE JOURNAL OF MARY HERVEY RUSSELL
BEFORE THE CROSSING
THE BLACK LAUREL
THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

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>>>>>>> Chapter One

and beat in towards the land, would show, in the clear air, rocks—black seals' heads in the foam below the cliffs, then, the face of the cliffs, the rank grass at their edge, the sheds and runways of the small airfield, the two or three stunted pines bowed to the east, and—in June at their true distance—the hills.

The wooden building, two low storeys, at the farther side of the airfield, had in two years lived fifty, so cruelly had it shrunk into itself to endure the sea winds and the sharp salt of the air. A door open on to the field led directly into the room in use as lounge, office, waiting-room for passengers, the only room it was possible to heat properly in winter. At the moment, door and windows were widely open: a light, a very light flying lick of wind from the sea skimmed across airfield and room, the first breath of the long brilliant northern summer evening.

There were three people in the room-two young men,

a pilot-officer and a sergeant-pilot of the R.A.F., and a girl; the girl was wearing a uniform at first glance identical with theirs, that of a pilot in the W.R.A.F. Elbow pressing the desk, the young officer listened on the telephone, using the least possible effort—it was easier to lean his head sideways than to lift the instrument: he had a curiously narrow ear, flattened against a long head, now rigid and attentive, the attentive point in a long thin lounging body. Lines sketched in below his eyes marked the first anxieties that were not those of a child.

The others listened. They were able to fill in most of the gaps from a stock of common living: they saw the airfield through a single pair of eyes, and, under the immense sky, moved about in it as one body.

"... Henderson ... due back to-day ... yes, sir, in the Anson ... four of us—Sergeant-Pilot Marriot, L.A.C. Smith, Flight-Officer Hugh-Brown, myself ... she came back Monday ... no, sir ... oh, quite ... well, I'm sorry, sir, it didn't work out that way ..."

Tilting his head a little so that he could look at the girl, Andrew Kent kept his eyes on her—without speech in them—simply looking, as if to carry over to her the voice she could not hear of the man at the other end of the wire. His own voice had become flat and quietly stubborn.

"... afraid I didn't get that ... sorry, sir, what did you say? ... yes ... no ... very good, sir ..."

His voice changed again, becoming easier: he dropped a pencil he was balancing on his right palm and had gripped; his shoulders relaxed.

". . . yes, down to the last typist-papers, laboratory equipment, everything. All the stuff we couldn't send over

in the aircraft has been destroyed . . . yes . . . oh, by the way, one chap committed suicide, one of the scientists . . . not the faintest—unless he didn't like the idea of America . . . a very neat job—he poisoned himself . . . not at all . . . right . . . very good, sir . . . yes . . . no . . . yes . . ."

Laying the receiver down, he came back, slowly, to the neglected untidy room, seeing nakedly for a moment its leather armchairs, ill-used and sagging, the litter of old newspapers and magazines covering the table, the faded posters, silly voices from the first weeks of the war, nailed casually to the walls, the harsh blistered wood, the dust. The girl during this moment was only her dark eyebrows and the stillness of her head, Marriot was his left arm, its shrunken and nearly useless fingers laid on his knee. He asked,

"Well? What'd he say?"

"Friendly little fellow, D.8," Kent answered. "His last remark was: You'll hear from me again. Kind of him. You wouldn't think I'd been hearing from him every mortal day for at least a month."

Without moving, the girl asked,

"What was he saying about me?"

Kent looked at her with a flicker of irony.

"Why hadn't you been sent off to America days ago? With the other lassies."

She said nothing to this.

"Any news," asked Marriot.

"Nothing fresh." He stretched his arms. After a moment he added, "I shouldn't think there's much left to go. What hasn't gone, won't." "We'll be four of ten thousand people who got away on the last plane," Marriot said.

The girl stood up. She was thin, and moved with a natural elegance. Her head of curled fine hair was shaped like Kent's: the effect of the lines of neck and cheek, of greenish-grey eyes set in wide sockets, was oddly that of a sculpture in polished wood. Hurrying towards beauty, she had not yet—she was very young—caught up with it.

"If there is a last aeroplane," she said. "If Jock Henderson comes back for us."

Kent smiled at her briefly.

"Why shouldn't he come?"

"Oh," she answered lightly, "it's a little like one of those dreams where someone is going to murder you and you try to get the door unlocked and can't."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Browny, we should have packed you off last week," Marriot said. He laughed at her. "You're morbid."

"Thanks. I don't feel in the least morbid. You're both so sure Jock will get back—but it would be much easier for them to write us off. Wouldn't it?"

"He'll be here this evening," Kent said.

Marriot yawned.

"We hope."

Kent turned to him.

"By the way, Davy-I remembered it when D.8 was babbling-what was it you pinched, that last time we were at Garra House?"

Marriot did not answer immediately. Taking his stiffened left arm by its sleeve, he lifted and set it on the padded arm

of his chair, looking at it a little stupidly, as if it were someone he ought to recognise.

"What are you talking about?"

"You took a paper of some sort from one of the cases when the chap was nailing it down. I meant to ask you about it afterwards. I forgot."

A year younger than Kent—twenty-two—Marriot was much less the unfinished sketch; face and body were already organised, distinctly and with a nervous tension. He was small, pale, with quick dark eyes, and finely rounded forehead. To these eyes, and to a mouth so formed that it was already smiling, he owed his look of intelligence and a serious charm.

"I didn't," he said gently, "know you were watching me." Kent lifted his eyebrows.

"I wasn't watching."

"All right, but it wouldn't interest you at all. It just happened to be about the thing I was working on in London—before the war. It caught my eye. I was curious about it. That's all. It wasn't anything important. D'you want to look at it?" He took a notebook from his pocket. "It's here."

"Good God, no."

In an amused voice, the girl asked,

"I never knew what you took a degree in, Davy-what sort of a terrible scientist are you?"

"Would you know one sort of physicist from any other?" Kent mocked her.

"No." She looked at Marriot again. "Tell me what you would have been doing, if we hadn't had this war."

"Research, Browny, applied physics."

"Now you know, my child," Kent said.

She turned away and walked across the room to the window. Without following her glance, the two young men saw airfield, cliff-edge, the steep wall of the sea sending out its bright darts. They saw as well the sky, unwrinkled and vacant.

"I'm certain Jock won't be here this evening," she said lightly.

"Well, to-morrow, then," Marriot said.

He got up, looked round him for the tunic he had thrown on the table, thrust his sound arm into a sleeve, and tried to jerk the rest of the garment round his shoulders. Without haste, Kent reached over and pulled it on for him.

"After supper I'll have another go at your arm," he said. "I hope to God that not having it treated all this time hasn't ruined it."

"Why should it?"

Kent lifted the hand: it lay across his long fingers like the claw of an animal; he examined it for a moment, touching it with an infinite gentleness, almost love.

"You damned idiot-you could be in New York with it now."

Marriot smiled quickly.

"It's all right," he said.

Picking up a newspaper—since none of them was less than three or four weeks old, it scarcely mattered which he took—he sauntered out with it on to the airfield.

"Cordelia," Kent said gently.

She turned from the window, and came, quickly, smiling, to rest her hands on his shoulders. They kissed, and Kent held her, looking down, with a grave excitement and anxiety, at her eyes; and as though they were strange to him, delib-

erately, closely, at the strongly arched brows, the black eyelashes, the flawed greenness surrounding pupils where he saw himself reflected, infinitely small. He ran his finger over the elongated line from her chin to the slender point of her jaw, and over her throat. When he lifted his head, the airfield, suspended in the clear light, shivered as though it were part of the bubble surrounding them. His anxiety returned.

"I wish you had gone, my love."

"You don't," Cordelia said.

She had a quick low voice, a little older than her age: the assurance she did not yet feel had touched it.

"No, of course I don't—but if for any reason Jock doesn't come, you'll be trapped."

She smiled and said gaily,

"With you, and forty million other people."

"The others don't interest me."

Moving quickly, she went back to the chair she had been sitting in. She leaned back. Kent seated himself on an arm.

"We might be all right," she said. "They may be devils—I don't suppose they are—or not all of them. But they can hardly kill millions of us. It would be ridiculous."

"Idiot," Kent said. They guarded themselves, by childish insults, from a too willing surrender to their passion for each other: it was not purely a happiness, there was something else in it, obscure, even frightening, and instinctively they avoided it. "They needn't kill anyone. That chap Nairne who came through last week—how many people did he say we could feed—that is, if they let us? It wasn't an awful lot. What's happened . . . the fact is, we haven't taken it in yet."

"We might stay up here, and become crofters."

"We might."

She looked away from him.

"You'd hate not flying."

Biting back the anger and impatience he felt—not with her—Kent said,

"I shouldn't care to live all day with my feet in muck."

"We might both have been born on a croft."

"We might. But we weren't." Less sharply, he added, "I'm a good pilot; I never wanted to do anything else—I should be a rotten farm labourer. And I don't want to live up here, either."

Cordelia turned her head for a moment to glance at the sea: the shock of delight it gave her—that wide moving acreage of light, pointed thorns of light, springing, falling apart—belonged, she thought, to others of her family, master mariners, stubborn obscure men, surviving only in her. How a child would like living here, she thought.

"I like it here."

"You've only seen it in summer," Kent warned her.

Without knowing why, she persisted.

"If we were together I should be happy anywhere. I could be quite happy playing with bits of ice, like Kay in the fairytale. I'm the most ordinary person you'll ever know—I like to polish chairs, and cook, and a fine day makes me want to sing at the top of my voice."

"My little love," Kent said—he could not endure what he felt; he stood up and began to walk about—"we've got to get away—and you know why."

"You mean—I can't have my baby in a croft. Why not?" She folded her hands and said calmly, "Yes, seriously, why not? Do you know, silly, when my mother had me she was

in a small ship, at Murmansk. They'd been caught in the ice. No one was there but my father and the steward. And she was nineteen, and I'm nearly a year older. It would be better than that."

He stood still and glared at her.

"No."

Hiding a smile, she said,

"Don't be sorry we're having it, will you?"

"Never," he said, severely—the severity was for himself: at the back of his thought, he felt that her wish and his yielding to it had been a mistake. "But until I get you out of the country I shall only be damned anxious. And you know it."

"Don't!"

Kent came back quickly to her chair.

"Don't what, puppy?"

She recovered her calm again at once, and said—how easily, he thought, she says what, if anyone else said it, would only be awful:

"I'm ashamed of this, Andy,—yes, really. David would say I'm morbid, which isn't true. But think of all the children—who knows, who will ever know how many of them?—dead, under those rubbish heaps of towns and villages. Not only our country, but all the others. They must have been afraid—and cried. And—it's only for a moment—I can hear our child crying. And yet children can be happy. I was awfully happy . . . it doesn't seem very long ago—" She turned abruptly, with a violence unlike her, and pressed her forehead against his arm. "Have we been fools?"

This won't do, he thought. He said coolly,

"No, of course not. We shall be all right. In a few days we'll be in a country that hasn't been done for. We'll live

there, we'll be happy, we'll work . . . You mustn't make a fuss."

She turned her head sideways: he looked down at her, and was struck through by the thought that he could protect her against nothing in a country given over to its enemies. There was no safety, and no one thought any longer that the little bodies of children should not be broken into.

"There'll still be the war," Cordelia said.

"Of course. But we're used to that now."

She sat up, and he saw with relief that she was smiling. He had fallen in love with her first because she was gay and serious, like a well-brought-up child, with a will of her own but no vanity.

"My mother could remember what it was like before the first war. That is, she could remember that there was such a time—not what it must have felt like."

"Some things must have been just the same," Kent said. "This sort of thing"—he touched her cheek with one finger.

"I'll be a good wife-whatever happens, I won't fuss. And I'll take care of you."

"We'll prop each other up, shall we?" Kent said.

He bent over her. His ear caught the sound of Marriot's footsteps on the dry grass; he slid off the arm of the chair. Marriot, as he came in, said,

"Bad news, Browny, your blessed little hare has hopped it."

Cordelia jumped up.

"Gone?"

"Stiff as a board."

Half laughing at the grief she felt, Cordelia said,

"Oh, Davy."

"Just as well," Marriot said. "He wouldn't have had much of a life with a broken leg."

"I was going to take him with me."

"They'd have quarantined him," said Kent.

Marriot saw that the girl had a superstitious feeling of bad luck; he was amused and he understood it. He said carelessly,

"Never mind, Browny. I'll buy you something in New York—a house-trained bear." He spread the illustrated paper he was carrying, open, on the table, and pointed to a page. "Look at them. Were you ever in a rich night club? Did people really sit about vacantly, in rows of teeth, asking to be photographed? They look half-witted. My God, was it time the ceiling fell on them!"

They leaned over the picture together, in a single impulse of curiosity—except that neither Cordelia nor Marriot had ever been inside a fashionable restaurant; until the war neither of them had had money to spend, nor, during the war, chance. Cordelia stood between the young men, drawn back into the half-instinctive life they shared, with its meagre vocabulary and few childish gestures. Kent said easily,

"They weren't doing any harm."

"Not good enough these days," Marriot said with contempt.

With a friendly pity—since it was so little likely that anyone would say it again of the young woman she was pointing at—Cordelia said,

"She's charming. Look."

"Umh'm."

The closed door leading to the other rooms—and, at the end of the long passage with its half-dozen doors, to the staircase to the upper floor-was vigorously kicked. Kent

opened it.

Entering with his loaded tray, Smith brought into the room the thing it lacked: stability, a link with the outer, middle-aged, once-upon-a-time respectable world. His face showed all the marks of his forty-five years, drawn deeply and roughly in its hard flesh; a shrewd derisive glint in his eyes was unkind only for strangers—not that he meant any harm by them, but, as Yorkshiremen do, he looked slyly down on them, because you never know but what they think themselves clever or successful, and such men need to be warched.

Piled on the tray in disorder were tumblers, plates, knives and forks, two opened tins of butter, and more of tongue. He lowered it on to the table, sweeping off with an elbow the litter of papers. Cordelia helped him; between them, they set out a slovenly meal: she had forbidden herself—not because the other two laughed at her—to give their meals an air of order: knives and forks dropped in a heap, tins half emptied, then chucked out, were one way, surely, to make their departure real.

"Did you make the coffee?" she asked Smith.

"Yes, ma'am." He went back into the passage and lifted from the floor a second tray with cups and large jugs, and brought it to the table. "I must have made gallons of the stuff to-day."

"Well, this time, I hope you've made it strong," said Kent. Smith's voice was as low and gentle as his dialect was tart. "It's near as strong as the tea we had brewing all day when I was a lad. Black as pitch."

Marriot sat down to the table. The others wandered about,

plate or cup in hand, as though it were a buffet. Stumbling over a suitcase lying on the floor open, Kent dropped his plate, swore, and pushed the broken pieces out of sight with his foot.

Smith asked,

"Any fresh news, sir?"

"No."

There was a pause, then Smith said quietly,

"I've been through this before. From, as you might say, the other side."

Kent looked at him with a smile.

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"I was in Norway, y' see, in 1940, when they had their invasion. It was a rare mess, we pulled out in a hurry, back home. They were coming away themselves, b' plane and boats—their King and that lot. People like us, too—hundreds of them. It never struck me till now—they weren't coming home; of course they weren't, they were getting out. Same as us now. On account of the country couldn't be held."

"Like us," Marriot said lightly.

Smith ignored this. The effort he was making—half vexed with himself, since what good does it do you turning up back thoughts?—to see clearly a country he thought he had forgotten, and faces, among them his own, jumbled under dust and rubbish in an attic, took all his energy. Otherwise he would have shut up—thinking he was being laughed at.

"Things they said to us—and their looks. I was a stranger there; it was England I was going to—I didn't see, as you might say, into th' room. But by jiminy, I know now what they felt. 'This country,' our captain says, meaning Norway, 'can't be held.' Well, what of it, I thought, we can go home

again, can't we? Worse things happen. Turn our backs . . . It never struck me—'The country can't be held' meant different to them. It meant—b'God, it meant like this. Bitter—hell."

Kent frowned, caught by a grief he did not recognise, and half bored.

"They went back, didn't they?" he said.

"Some of them."

"Right," Kent said, waving his arm, "we may be lucky."

Smith narrowed his eyes. Young know-nought, he thought, with malice but not unkindly. He liked the pilots, had been anxious about them often, liked Kent rather more than most. And he was still adrift, trying painfully to settle by thinking about it a problem he felt ought never to have been landed on him.

"Have you ever been in Leeds, sir?" he asked Kent.

"No," Kent said. "Yes, once."

"Not in my part of it, though." He saw a rabble of streets that were one and the same street, houses reared back to back, down, up, down, up, sooty walls, smoke, doorsteps ritually whitened with the block of sandstone, lace curtains. A couple of streets from his own door, along and down, an easy eight minutes in the weak sunlight, twenty on hands and knees in the icy frosts, and you were at the factory. "If they're there still," he said reluctantly, "what's going on in them streets? Nothing, eh? No noise, even the Halliday woman, brassy voice she has, keeping quiet. Women as used to live half th' day on their doorsteps. Every door shut, and the women with nothing to do but wait. I can just see 'em. Waiting."

Glancing briefly at Cordelia, Kent saw that she had been

disturbed by this, he called it, muttering. He was vexed with Smith.

"Why not use your imagination on us?"

The young man's voice, curt and sullen, fetched Smith back sharply into the room; he remembered who he was and where he was, and fell back hurriedly, glad of it, into his easy-tempered reliable mistrustful self.

"You and Miss Brown, sir, and Sergeant Marriot," he said, "will be all serene over there. Plenty others like you."

Is he worrying? thought Kent. Why?

"So will you. Every mechanic wanted. That's what they said."

Except for the flicker of irony in the eyes, small, living an animal life of their own in their sunken pits, his face was shut like a fist.

"That's right, sir."

Marriot at this moment dropped the knife he was using with his sound hand. He frowned, leaning back in his chair. Without hurrying himself—they went through this game at every meal—Kent walked round the table to him and said casually,

"Here. Let me."

He dug out more ham from a tin and began cutting it on Marriot's plate; he spread four or five rusks thickly with butter, salted them, and poured coffee.

"Master David finish up all his good food," he mocked.

Smith watched them rather grimly. Born between two wars, childer, more likely babbies, he thought, in 1939, what have they had? He felt gentle towards them, and bitter. The three of them—"Reach me over that paper, Browny," Marriot said—were together: as it were, against him. But what

excluded him was not a difference of class-every which as good as the next man, and don't you forget it-not of authority, even. Such ambiguous authority as Kent had. It was their ages. They were lighter and he slower and heavier by twenty or more years' weight of trivial memories: the bedroom in Nidder Street, its ropes of flowers faded on the only wall where an acid sun caught them, the pitch-pined cupboard, the framed print of Proserpine leaving hell-so familiar that he had never actually seen it and now recalled only a piercing blue-his wife lying on her side in bed, under the heavy quilt-Turn yourself round now, old girl, he said; he stretched his arm over her thigh, and slapped it gently; the people jostling him in trams and shops, the women's hair screwed into steel curling-pins, clumsy male bodies, as absent to him, yet easy to his hand, aching muscles, shrewd jog-trot thoughts, as his own; the kids yelling at play round the lamp-posts, flying through the circle of light, and away; voices of women; days guttering down to winter. Groping in his mind again towards that one casual experience of defeat, exile, loneliness, he thought it had happened many times before. Many had gone through it: what they had endured, he could. He had a cold feeling of being companioned: it helped him.

Marriot turned over with his fork the paper spread open beside his plate. In a jeering voice he said,

"Yes, well time they were written off. Call me early, mother dear, for I'm to be Queen o' the May, mother, I'm to be Queen o' the May."

The telephone rang.

As Kent listened, the change in his face, to a haggard severity and coldness, shocked Cordelia into saying,

"What is it?"

He looked at her with annoyance and waved his hand impatiently for them to be quiet. They were quiet, and watched him. Reaching for his pad, he began to write down a string of names, repeating them aloud.

"Yes . . . Yes, sir . . . Major-General Thorburn. T for Thomas, H for Harry, yes . . . Brigadier Clarke, Major Heron, Professor— What? . . . B-r-e-u-n-e-r—oh, Breuner . . ."

"Is he called Emil?" asked Marriot.

Kent glared at him.

"... Colonel Lackland ... Five. Yes, sir ... No ... Why send them here, sir? ... Oh, I see. ... No, I don't know whether it's clear ... No, sir. I thought they had enough on their plate without dishing out information to us. We expected to be seeing for ourselves ... Yes, sir ... Thanks ... No ... Yes ... I see."

A pause. He appeared to be still listening, but in some way the others knew that he was leaning over a silence, the man who had been talking to him had put his receiver down, gone. Kent replaced his. He looked at them without a flicker of recognition or interest for a moment. Cordelia said anxiously,

"Well?"

Kent spoke with the reflexive lightness a shock brings into use.

"Famous last words. D.8 closing down now, D.8 closing down, no more from me, no more from me."

"Oh, is he?" Marriot said: "but what's it about?"

"He's sent us a truck-load of V.I.P.'s," Kent answered, coldly, "for Jock to take back with him. Five of them."

No one answered him for a moment. Then Cordelia said, "Five?"

"I said five. Full house and all that."

Smith watched them, and thought slyly: They'll make out all right. He remembered his shipwreck during the last war, the fear and bitter cold afterwards in the boat, and Thorngill, when one of them, washed overboard by a wave, was washed in again by the next, saying: Can't you make up your mind?

"We've had it," Marriot said gently.

"Oh, we've had it all right," Kent said. He was suddenly amused by the way it had happened, a wave rushing over sand-castle, bucket, shoes. "No more from bloody him," he sang.

"Why," asked Marriot, "send them here?"

"Some goddam mess-up. Five odds and sods who've been knocking round from place to place for a week."

He was putting off the moment when he would look at Cordelia. Not that he was afraid—and knew what to say—but when their looks met it would be final, a confession of disaster, as good as saying: It's all up. Stupid with anger and grief, he thought: One more minute, give her another minute to hope.

Smith said cheerfully,

"Well, sir, that's settled us."

To his own surprise, Kent burst into a loud laugh.

"There are times, Smith, when I believe you think."

Now he could look at her, a long steady look, letting her know that they were hopelessly done for, that he loved her and would cut a hand off to save her, but it was no use. She looked back at him with as much steadiness. "He knows Jock won't be able to make another trip?"

"Oh, he knows all right," Kent said. My love, he thought, my heart's girl, my child.

"Very important persons, Browny," said Marriot, "are very important. Don't get ideas into your head about yourself."

"Closing down now," Kent said. "No more from me."

Marriot smiled, with a touch of malice.

"Another candidate for the last plane."

"Probably."

"Listen," Smith said.

The others heard nothing, but he shook his head, scratched it, and clumped out. Marriot went as far as the doorway and stood there, shielding his eyes with his hand. The sun was low enough to send a molten tide leaping across the airfield, reflecting the cries of gulls. The girl had run to the window. Kent followed her: without looking at her—he did not know what sort of wild hope she might be nursing, and would rather not know—he took hold of her hand as they stood there, listening. After a moment, they heard the noise of a light truck on the road at the back. He tightened his grip for an instant, then went out on to the airfield.

Marriot came back into the room. In a quick rough way, Cordelia was piling their plates and cups on the trays. He watched her for a minute, sorry for her, and feeling briefly guilty because this mattered much to her and so little to him. He had no feeling that she ought to be looked after, as a young woman, but he was fond of her: he noticed that her hands were unsteady.

"Poor old Browny."

She looked at him with unexpected fierceness.

"Why me?"

"Oh, I don't know. You look as though you'd dropped your Saturday sixpence down a drain. I'll tell you what, old Browny—" he stopped. "Here they come."

They straggled in, filling the doorway, breaking up as they came forward into fragments of bodies: a face dislocated by fatigue, another so darkly tanned that it was startling and vivid, a black eye-patch. With a light shock, Cordelia saw that among them was a youngish woman—exhausted, and in spite of it elegant: and a child, who might be five years old; he had dark sorrowful eyes in a white face; he lay back as if he were broken in the arms of a young soldier, very young, a plain countryfied lad, holding him with awkward tenderness. Cordelia hurried towards them. The woman was carrying a suitcase: she handed it to Cordelia, without speaking, and let herself fall into the chair the girl dragged forward.

One of the older men, the general, spoke to Kent, growled, rather, like a good-tempered bear; he had an enormous head, his uniform looked as though he had rolled in it through a hedge: taking his cap off, he rubbed his head until it bristled with grey knots and wisps.

"I suppose this is the place?"

"We were expecting you, sir," Kent said. "That is, I've just been told to expect five people."

There were six men, one of them a civilian with a brown piratical face, and, as well, the woman and the little boy.

"Oh, you were? Well? I don't see any aeroplane."

"There'll be one any minute, sir. To-day or to-morrow. Possibly this evening."

The general's massive face twitched.

"Is that your idea of any minute? What nonsense! We were told it was here."

Unmoved, Kent said,

"What is called an intelligent forecast, sir. Won't you sit down?"

The general flung himself untidily into an arm-chair, growling,

"Sit down, Clarke, sit down, man."

Moving as though he were deformed in some way, the brigadier took a step nearer the chair Kent pushed towards him, groaned, and remained standing. He was short, plump, rosy-cheeked—the face of an intelligent rogue, thought Kent: in the same moment, he noticed the old man's treble row of ribbons, among them the D.S.O. In a voice between a crow and a chuckle, Clarke said to him,

"I'm ruined if I sit down—if I have to get up again. Where is this aeroplane of yours, boy? Is it worth my while to bend meself? Hey?"

"I should if I were you, sir," said Kent. "It may be twenty-four hours."

Groaning, hand over his reins,

"Thank your stars you're not me."

"Sit down, Will, sit down, can't you?" the general said, genial and impatient.

Obviously in pain—and making the most of it—the brigadier lowered himself heavily into the chair. "Oh, my God," he muttered, "my God, my God."

Glancing at the other officers—both of them men in the middle thirties—Kent thought: What am I to do with all these old birds if Jock doesn't turn up? And which of them do the woman and her child belong to? . . . All of them

except one of the younger officers were pretty dishevelled; he was on the point of asking the general if he would like to wash before he had supper when this officer—the colonel—threw him out of his stride by asking sharply,

"You in charge here?"

Annoyed, Kent stared at him for a moment before he answered. A lean broad-shouldered man below middle height, trim, astonishingly trim, almost spruce, with a pale face and one coldly blue eye—a black patch hid the other—not a pleasant or an attractive face, but, Kent thought unwillingly, to be trusted.

"I am."

"The place seems deserted."

Is he implying that otherwise I wouldn't be in charge? Kent thought. He frowned—and tried to cover up his annoyance by saying amiably,

"You're Colonel Lackland, sir, aren't you? If you'd come here ten days ago, you'd have found it littered with people. There are only four of us left now."

Lackland lifted almost colourless eyebrows.

"Where are the rest?"

"In America or Canada, most of them. Except a few who nipped off home when no one was looking—"

The general, head on his chest, had slumped in his chair like an old—and dirty—sack. Interrupting,

"Very small airfield, isn't it?"

"Very, sir."

"What's it doing here?"

"It was put down, sir, for the use of Garra House-if you know it. I don't suppose you do. A research place of some

sort—very hush-hush. Gone now, though. We've been evacuating the staff."

As he spoke, Kent kept an interested eye on the movements of the second of the younger officers—Major Heron, he would be. A minute ago he had strolled—like an actor who has been told, Stroll, don't walk—to the door: he stood there, hand on his hip, head flung back, and examined the airfield through half-closed eyes. Turning, he caught the young man's eye on him, and sauntered back into the middle of the room: he had a remarkable face, Kent now saw, crumpled as though he slept on it, with delicate features and thick fair hair, of an unmilitary length. He was tall.

In a friendly voice, soft, and at the same time playful and supercilious, he asked Kent,

"Is this place safe?"

Kent looked at him with the surprise he felt.

"How do you mean?" He had no reason to be careful with these intruders, and went on maliciously, "We used to have a few army types ready to defend us. I'm afraid we shipped them forward with the rest."

Heron smiled with one side of his mouth.

"I was thinking about bombs. An airfield, surely . . . and if we have to hang about here for days . . ."

Windy, thought Kent. Understanding, and slightly contemptuous, he said,

"I don't think they'll notice us much. I'm afraid there's nowhere else I can put you. There was only Garra House itself—five miles away—it's in rather a mess now. Sorry, and all that."

Heron did not raise his voice. His nerves betrayed themselves by a twitching muscle in his cheek, below the eye.

"You were left here, I imagine, because no one supposed you would have anything to deal with—of the least importance—"

He was interrupted before Kent had had time to lose his temper. With a brisk movement of his broad spare body, Colonel Lackland stepped in front of him.

"How're y'off for stores?"

"Any amount of food, sir," Kent said. "Very little drink." The general, he saw, had dropped off to sleep, his great

The general, he saw, had dropped off to sleep, his great head lolling sideways: a clenched hand, the hard swollen fingers of an old man, rested on his knee. So long as I don't have to wake him, he thought . . . His eye was caught by the only one of them who had not spoken yet, the civilian—he must be the professor. Breuner. He was standing apart from the rest, with a stillness—no, an absence—attentive and listening, but not to anything in the room. His face had been darkened by the sun to a blackish brown; it was an attractive face, serene, nearly unlined, except for the fine lines spreading upwards from the ends of small dark eyes, very dark, almost black, and uncommonly bright: there was something feminine in his face, and something Chinese . . . Kent swung round: Major Heron had walked over to the woman lying back in her chair, her eyes closed.

"Are you all right, Elizabeth?"

So that's where she belongs, Kent thought. Opening her eyes, the woman smiled, a barely perceptible smile, but gay and reassuring: she was younger than, when he was helping her out of the truck, he had thought: not in the least beautiful—her mouth was very large and her eyes too narrow—but even in her exhaustion, and with long streaks of dust over

her face, she had a lively charm. She sat up, with an effort. "Yes, of course I am."

Her voice struck Kent: it was strong, yet quick and light; there were flawed notes in it, profoundly disturbing, in the way a memory disturbs, sneaking in furtively. He stared at her, frankly surprised that a voice, any voice, could do so much. Turning to him, she asked,

"Is there anywhere we can sleep?"

"Oh, yes, rather," he answered. "Uncomfortable, I'm afraid. We weren't expecting a woman."

Cordelia spoke quickly.

"If you'll come with me . . . and the little boy—" she held her arms out to the child, but he turned his head away, hiding his face against the young soldier's arm. His mother pulled herself to her feet and said,

"Come, Nick. Time you were in bed."

The child did not speak, only clung more tightly to the soldier—who flushed a dark brick-red and mumbled,

"I'll carry him for you, ma'am."

"No," Mrs. Heron said, "put him down, Hutton. . . . That's enough," she said gently to the child.

Her marvellous voice had no power, it seemed, over her child. Set down, he leaned against Hutton, his eyes shut, embracing him with one small dirty arm. His mother frowned lightly. Before she could speak, Breuner moved quickly and was standing over Nick, not touching him, simply looking down at him, with an attentive smile.

"If you don't sleep," he said, "you won't be able to go in the aeroplane."

He spoke like a foreigner: it was less the accent than an un-English inflection of his low voice.

Nick glanced round at him.

"Shall I see it?"

"Yes—you'll see it coming. You'll hear it, too. But until you hear it snoring you'll think it's a sea-gull."

The child's smile altered his face instantly, to a lively mischief.

"Sea-gulls don't snore."

"Aeroplanes do," Breuner said. "They fly in their sleep, and snore madly."

"Yes, I know, I've heard them," said Nick.

He let go of Hutton and went languidly to his mother. With a glance at Kent—it was the first time she had looked at him since he brought these people in—Cordelia took them away. At the same moment, the general started awake, muttering,

"Damn it, I've been asleep. I hate that."

"Would you care to come along, sir?" Kent said to him. "We can give you all beds. Nothing much else, though."

"Yes, very well," the general said heavily. "I should like a wash and I should like some food." Struggling out of his chair, he lumbered over to the brigadier. "You, too, Will . . . Help him up, George—and you—"

Groaning, Kent on one side of him, and Heron somewhat uselessly on the other, Clarke stood up.

"They ought to send me to the knacker's," he croaked. "Ugh. I'm broken—yes, broken."

"Nonsense," the general said.

For his size, the brigadier was heavy. Half coaxing, half dragging him, Kent got him out of the room. The others followed. Smith came in from the airfield, carrying a suitcase in one hand and an officer's canvas bag in the other, and

hurried through. He looked at Hutton, jerking his head backwards at the airfield: the young soldier went out.

Left alone in the room, Marriot made the gesture of an impudent schoolboy, thumbing his nose after them. If Jock has the sense he was born with, he said to himself, he'll shed the lot of them into the North Sea. . . . He turned and looked out. The evening was settling down into the brief northern night, as a lake settles when the sun leaves it; the light that has been doubling it runs away in the trees on its edge, it becomes smaller and dark. The gulls swooped lower. A confused sadness entered him—as soon as he knew it for what it was he jeered at himself. Indigestion, too much strong coffee—what else? I don't tell myself lies, he thought, mocking himself.

He went out.

After a minute, Cordelia came back and stood looking about her, at the room: she was surprised to see the remains of their meal on the table—that had surely been long ago, days ago. When Kent came in, he saw her before she heard him. She turned round. He came up to her, and they looked at each other without speaking: it was one of their moments, when they were so sure of each other that touch would separate them.

"How long have we been married?" Kent asked.

"Fifty years."

"Yes, I thought so."

"Why them and not us?"

"Very important persons."

"More important than we are?"

"Obviously."

She frowned. "It's not right."

He felt despair. He did not know what it was, except that it would help him if he could break things, or knock himself against the wall.

"My darling, my little fool, surely you don't expect D.8, or anyone else, to care what happens to us? But you must go. I must get you away somehow."

"Without you? . . . Don't be unkind."

"Unkind, kind," he exclaimed, "what do you mean? The only thing is to get you into safety."

She shook her head. There was nothing deliberate in her refusal, it was an obstinacy of her being, of more than her senses. She stood still, afraid if she moved of crying: it would weaken her hold on him.

"Even if I could go," she said slowly, "I wouldn't go alone."

"You must."

Standing stiffly, she closed her eyes, lifting her eyebrows in the effort not to cry, and said under her breath,

"No. . . . Not without you. I can't, Andy. Think of it. To be living over there, and you here. Never to see you again. Never. Never."

She was trembling. He felt an agony of grief and love, and had no idea what he was saying.

"Hush, my love, hush . . ."

"I will." She drew herself gently away. "There. . . . But it really isn't possible, Andy."

"It's not possible for you to stay here," he said. "In any case—they can't all go. Three of them will have to step down."

She looked at him with concern.

"You haven't told them that yet!"

"Oh," he said easily, "I thought they'd better have supper first. Steady them."

He began to move about the room, swinging his loose limbs. Without knowing it, he was relieved to be thinking about a normally awkward problem. Cordelia felt his relief.

"One thing," she murmured, "it's out of our hands. You can't send me off."

He stood still.

"Don't torment me," he said involuntarily. He came back and stood looking down at her with helpless severity. "I must somehow. I'll talk to Jock." An impulse half despair, half some other, less kind emotion, made him add, "Supposing he made room for us both—I couldn't go."

"Why not?"

"And leave Davy behind?"

"You'd choose him rather than me?" Cordelia said.

This was worse than he had meant it to be—but he had begun it, and he went on.

"You know what I mean-don't you? You understand all right."

She did not answer at once, then said,

"Yes, I do. I do. And I don't mind. That is, I mind frightfully, you ass. Yes, you are—and I know exactly what you mean."

"I love you so," Kent said desperately.

Someone was coming along the passage. Cordelia turned and walked quickly out, as the door opened, and Smith came in. His broad face, the derisive twinkle in his small eyes, were a comfort—like a familiar voice when you have been frightened. Kent grinned at him.

"Well, this is a nice do."

Smith grinned back.

"It's that all right, sir."

"Puts paid to us four, I'm afraid."

"That's as you look at it, sir. I've no doubt we s'll manage." He checked briefly. "There's just one thing—if you don't mind my saying so. If we can, we ought to get Miss Brown away in the Anson."

"If we can-yes," Kent said. "I agree."

He had no wish to talk about it, and went out on to the airfield, passing Hutton, bent under a heavy kit-bag, a suitcase in either hand, and bundles under his arms. He came into the room carrying them, and Smith looked at him, to see what he was made of. He appeared to be made of much the same hard-wearing bone as Smith himself. He was fair-haired, clumsy, with diffident blue eyes: he had very large hands, and large feet. Smith liked the look of him. It was a different liking than that he had for Kent and the others, easier and rougher—warmer.

"Do you think you're taking all that lot with you?" he jeered.

"It's not mine," Hutton said.

"Nay, I didn't think it was."

Dropping the suitcases, and lowering kit-bag and bundles on to a chair, Hutton asked shyly,

"D'y' mind if I eat a bite?" He looked at the table. "We haven't had much."

"You're welcome," Smith said. "Plenty more where it came from, as we say at home." This stuck in him. He cleared his throat and muttered, "Used to say."

Hutton looked at him and said placidly,

"Ay, it's a bouger, but we'll do it yet." He dug a knife into one of the half-empty tins. "I heard th' King say that on th' wireless before he flew off."

"Ha, he did, did he?"
"Something o' that."

had fallen into the sea, but it was light still, with an unreal meditative light; a bird flaunting across it startled the surface. George Heron, who had gone out immediately after supper, bored by his companions, came back and found the room empty and tidied, and unfriendly, like any other waiting-room. As, loathing it with all his exasperated nerves, he stepped inside, the other door opened: his wife came in from upstairs. She walked towards him with her light step, as though anxiety were a dance she was practising.

He looked gratefully at her. She had made up, with her ordinary care, had found in her luggage a fresh blouse, brushed her grey skirt and jacket—she might have been coming to meet him across the field below their garden at home. For less than a moment he saw, behind her, the long plain old house, the stream, the dawdling Essex country, the chestnuts and lilac. The glass door of his library, with its wide book-shelves from ceiling to floor, stood open to the rough

lawn. There was no telephone in the house, no wireless: perhaps, if the previous owner had not troubled to put in electricity, Heron would have kept the candle-brackets and lamps, he was so charmed to be living in what he thought of as our last civilised years before the worm of democracy began eating into manners and government, bringing on us the meanest of tyrannies-of the stupid many against the élitebringing on democratic wars, naturally the coarsest and most frightful, and, he felt it coming, it drove him to live and write in the past, the death from loss of freedom and blood of our country's self. For the sake of tradition, he, the Platonist, faithfully went to church; a born snob, he would have thrown away all his exalted friendships if that would have helped him to write a great book: he was very careful, spending an hour before breakfast on his investments, and fell in love with a girl who was the daughter of a village doctor, with no money at all, and married her. And was very soon unfaithful to her, but with great reserve. They had been married now for eight years.

"Is the boy asleep?" he asked.

"Not yet," Elizabeth said. She smiled. "He's gone past himself—my mother used to say that. But he's lying down."

"You look tired," Heron said. "And I—I'm exhausted." He noticed that she was not wearing her wedding-ring. "Where are your rings?"

She lifted her hands in a quick gesture.

"It's absurd, but I've got thinner in the last week. They kept slipping off my finger, and I was afraid of losing them. They're in my pocket."

"I'm not much help to you, am I?" Heron grumbled.

"What a pest I've been to you yesterday and to-day! I couldn't live without you. It's shameful."

His wife looked at him as if she were amused and liked him.

"Shameful? What nonsense. If we didn't need each other, why are we married?"

"I give you more trouble than Nick. Far more."

"He can be quite devilish enough."

Heron frowned. He loved his son, and was proud of his intelligence and his looks, but to spend any time with a child bored him terribly; he did not know what to talk about with children.

"He's too self-possessed for his age. . . . I don't even know whether he likes me."

"He adores you," she said lightly: she was a little, a very little, amused by the thought that neither father nor son would know that the other liked him if she were not at hand to tell them. "If anything's shameful, my dear, it is that we're safe."

"For God's sake," Heron cried, "don't tempt providence." He was, she saw, really alarmed. It gave her a feeling of confidence and gaiety, as if she were protecting him.

"Oh, nothing dramatic ever happens to me. You know, George, there are people who insist on being unlucky, and others—all the others—like me, are born with a sign on them: Road diversion, go round. Don't you remember the plague of wasps the day Nick was born? Everyone in the house was stung except him—and except me, of course. . . . And how many narrow escapes have we had in the last month?"

"We're not out of danger yet," Heron said drily.

"No. But we're still together."

He felt remorse, and a love for her that startled him almost to tears.

"My dear dear Elizabeth-if we can begin again-over there-I'll never hurt you again. I promise."

Half sadly, half laughing,

"Oh, yes, you will," she retorted. "You won't change because we're living among strangers. And American women are hideously attractive. You have a snob value, too."

"Elizabeth!" he protested, shocked and amused.

"I didn't say you were a snob! I said that, in America, a successful writer counts twice—for himself and as a figure. It's annoying that I have more to lose than the wife of a dentist or a banker."

"Nonsense," said Heron. His head ached. "My God, how tired I am."

"Why not go to bed?"

"That would be idiotic," he said irritably. "We might still, I suppose, get away this evening."

"But if the plane comes, it can't leave again in five minutes."

"Don't nag at me," he said. "I can't possibly sleep."

The door opened, and the girl, the young ferry pilot—he had forgotten her name—poked her head round it.

"Mrs. Heron," she said, "Nick wants you."

"I'll come. Thanks," Elizabeth said quickly.

She hurried off, and he followed her, dragging himself with an effort. Extraordinary, he thought, the energy of women—at this moment it offended him.

Cordelia stood aside to let them pass her in the doorway. She was about to come into the room when she saw the two old generals approaching it across the airfield, and fled back. They were both—the impressive lumbering Thorburn, with his big head and stained shabby uniform, and the other, the jockey, Andy called him, lively in spite of his lumbago, like a terrier hopping on three legs—ridiculous. But she could not face them. How on earth—supposing he notices you at all—do you talk to a general? As she closed the door softly, she heard Clarke—they were almost in the room now—saying, "At my time of life, old boy . . ."

At his time of life, she thought-what?

". . . this running away in aeroplanes," Clarke said. "Is nothing short of absurd. Madness."

Half pushing, half helping him towards one of the leather armchairs, Thorburn said brusquely,

"Nothing wrong with your time of life. You're younger than I am. You shouldn't have lumbago—it's a vulgar disease."

"I'm a vulgar fellow," retorted Clarke. "Can't help it. I was born vulgar. I tell you it's ridiculous." In a cracked voice, he sang—he had a prodigious memory for songs he had heard, perhaps only once, when he was a child—"Fancy me in the altogether, Posing as Venus among the heather, At my time of life."

"Venus my foot," growled Thorburn. "You're an old fool." He laughed, showing his strong blackened teeth through a moustache he let grow much too long—it looked as if the mice had been at it.

Kent walked in at this moment from the airfield. Turning, Thorburn asked,

"Well? Any signs of your plane?"

"No, sir," said Kent. "I should think to-morrow."

"I'm not worried," Thorburn said sharply, he was vexed by the comforting tone of Kent's voice. "Too old to worry . . . May I ask what you're doing here, on this preposterous airfield?"

"Oh," Kent said, "I think you would call it a convalescent job, sir. I was expecting to be fetched back to my squadron—and Sergeant Marriot would have been sent for treatment—but then the roof fell on us. I mean the evacuation. We've been fairly busy."

"H'm. And Miss Hugh-Brown? What's she here for?" Less casually,

"Communication pilot, sir. If you look about under a blade of grass out there, you'll see her aircraft."

A pretty slack goings-on, the general reflected. It was not his business; he liked the look of the young man standing in front of him, but he did not approve—on principle, he did not approve.

"Convalescent, eh?" he muttered. "You and your sergeant?"

What's the old fool after? thought Kent. As curtly as he dared, he said,

"Yes. We got what you might call involved in the first week." He hesitated and went on, "We—I mean Miss Hugh-Brown, too—were all on the same Station in Norfolk, when the war started."

Clarke had been listening to him with an air of sly benevolence: he asked abruptly,

"How old are you, my boy?"

"Twenty-three." For no reason at all, he added, "Miss Hugh-Brown is twenty."

"Well," Thorburn said, broke off, rubbed his head, and muttered, "it's a poor business."

He meant that he would have preferred a war in which

young women knew their place as nurses, that Clarke's lumbago was very tiresome, that his own stomach was out of order—and no wonder, since what had happened in the last weeks was more than any stomach could bear. The pilot was staring at him with an obstinate, rather stupid look on his face, and after a moment said quietly,

"I suppose this is the end, sir?"

"End? What d'you mean, the end?" He had no wish to soften things for the young man, but he disliked having to put it into words. "There's no end, short of the end of the world. I don't think that's in sight—for all their devilry." Tell him the truth, he thought. And yourself, at the same time. "If you mean, Have we been driven off the island?—yes . . . London, the south, nearly all the ports—no more ships will leave any of the large ports—are . . . have you ever seen a man reduced to a—fly-blown—whimpering—no . . ." he checked himself and went on, "That's what has happened. And you'd think, standing on that cliff out there—there was nothing except peace, silence, bog-myrtle, gorse . . ."

He was silent. He felt old, heavy, useless.

"Oh-it's like that?" Kent said.

"It's like nothing you can imagine."

The young man said nothing for a moment; he straightened his long body, as though calling it to order, and said,

"It makes what happens to two or three people seem not very important . . . Well, if you'll excuse me, sir . . ."

He made off, with his quick careless walk, shoulders rounded slightly, to the inner door, and closed it noisily behind him.

Clarke had been watching him with an inquisitive kindness: if the young man had noticed it—disliking what he

called interference—it would have mortified him extremely. "What's the matter with him?" he asked.

"Is anything the matter?" Thorburn said, with indifference. "Why should there be?" He was more compassionate in other people's troubles than Clarke—but rarely noticed them. Clarke always did—and that was all: he did nothing further. "How d'you feel now? Heaven knows how you managed to-day's drive in that damned truck. Well, it's the last."

Clarke pulled a dog's face.

"By God it is. Another mile and I'd have been in Abraham's bosom. More than once, I may tell you, I thought of ordering myself to roll into a ditch and wait there for the wicked enemy to come along and put me out of my misery. He'd have done it like a shot."

"Yes, very like a shot," Thorburn said. He chuckled. "Back of the neck, I'm told."

They were silent, glad to be alone together, with their old aching bodies and oppressed minds. Clarke glanced round him at the room; he had the eyes of a peasant, shrewd, greedy, malicious.

"Decent place, this . . . Queer thing—all the time these last days, sitting in my poor bones like in a lump of lead, red-hot lead, by God, I was thinking—back . . . First day of your holidays, eh, Harry. Me knowing you were back home—and getting my poor mother, old devil she was, too, to work the pump over me while I cleaned up. I used to think: No, he won't come this time, why should he?—all right when we were kids, but it's got to stop some time, hasn't it? . . . And there you'd be, and the old woman bawling: Will, here's

Master Harry for you. And by God you might never have been away . . . Fifty years—nearly. And here we are."

They were silent for a moment. Thorburn said,

"I can't have been eight—which makes you six—when you showed me how to take trout out of the river."

"Yes, your own dad's trout," said Clarke. He laughed and groaned. "Oh, Lord, my back. If I'm to get into any plane to-morrow you'll have to roll me, I say, across the airfield."

"Don't worry," his friend said, impatient.

"I never worry," Clarke said placidly. "But—fifty years. I'm fifty-eight. I feel a hundred and fifty . . . Harry, m'boy, what use'll I be in America? Tell me that. You've got to be young and confident to start again. And in a noisy impatient country." He sighed. "I'm a fool. Fifty-eight—ex-ranker officer . . . I s'd never have stayed in the army in 1918. I should've gone back to farming . . ." He stopped—he did not want to look too closely at anything, least of all at himself: his instinct for playing the fool saved him. "To be a farmer's boy-hoy-hoy," he roared, "to be a farmer's boy . . . I did it because—you were a soldier for life, I thought I could be, too."

As willing as his friend to avoid feeling much, Thorburn said roughly,

"Well? You made a fine job of it. And it hasn't been a bad life."

"Damned good one," said Clarke.

"Then what are you grumbling about, you old fool?" Clarke gave him a sly glance.

"The fact is . . . No, never mind what it is. Tell you later, old boy. Not the time. Too many people about . . ." He had contorted his face into a preposterous look of cun-

ning. "Tell me, who's the chap we picked up at that last airfield?"

"You mean Breuner? Oh, a scientist of some kind. Austrian. I gathered from him he's been in this country for more than twenty years. You wouldn't think so. I don't care for scientists. Never did. Illiterate brutes. What we ought to have done, after the last war, when we knew what they were capable of, was pack them all off to a Devil's Island in the middle of the Antarctic and let them destroy each other."

"Scientist? Is he? What's he do? They come all sorts, you know."

"Biophysicist, I think," Thoburn said, yawning.

Baffled, Clarke said,

"What? Oh, come again to-morrow, will you?" He brooded a minute, and said sourly, "He'll find a job waiting for him . . . Maybe I could raise hogs over there, eh?"

Thorburn glanced at him with affection and impatience.

"Leave it, leave it," he said, bored. "You'll be all right."

Clarke did not answer. After a time he said,

"It's getting dark-well, not exactly dark."

"Deceitful," said Thorburn. He stood up, and rolled his heavy body as far as the window. Suddenly he exclaimed, "See those birds?"

Turning his head, Clarke saw, crossing the oblong of sky, black against that pale greenish blue, arched wings. He knew what they were, but, because it would please Thorburn to tell him, he asked,

"What are they?"

"Geese. Wild geese."

"Leaving, eh? I wonder . . ." Recklessly, he let himself tumble into one of the cracks opening in his mind. "By God,

Harry, it's all wrong. V.I.P.'s. Damn all V.I.P.'s. Why bother with them? They s'd have loaded the cruisers and aeroplanes with young men. And young women."

"So they have," Thorburn said. "Some of them." Clarke did not notice him.

"So long as I live, old boy," he said slowly, "so long as I live—if it's ten years or ten days—I shan't forget that place we came through. You remember it—a church on the hill and the people going up to it, families, children and all. Th' whole of the village must ha' gone to church that day . . . And that other place—town—and the planes going over in a great flight . . . People standing there in the streets looking up, watching them leave . . . There was a man shook his fist. He must have cursed them, because a woman struck his arm down. She said something. I couldn't hear."

"Yes, I heard," Thorburn growled. "What she said was: Keep your ill mouth shut, I hope my boy's in one of them." "Ay, that's it, that's it," Clarke stammered, "that's what it'll be."

He stared at Thorburn, and even in his grief he could not help looking like a buffoon and rolling his eyes. Neither of them spoke. With relief, they heard someone walking along the passage. When the door opened and Major Heron came in, Thorburn's face changed, becoming gentler, and anxious.

"There you are, my dear George," he exclaimed. "You look pretty done in. You'd better get some rest."

"I'm all right," Heron said carelessly. "Tired, of course. How do you feel?"

Lumbering back to his chair, Thorburn laughed—a nearly

inaudible laugh, which shook his ungainly body and made him look younger and a little sly.

"It takes more than a week's battering about in a truck to damage my hard old bones," he said.

Heron smiled.

"If you can stand it, sir, I hope I can," he said, with a trace of indulgence in the respectful tone of his voice.

Clarke had never been able to make up his mind about George Heron. He felt that his old friend's affection for the younger man was more than a little absurd. If Heron had been his son . . . not that fathers and sons are always or more than rarely devoted . . . but it would at least have been an excuse for Thorburn's fondness. When George Heron was a child, Thorburn bored his friends with stories about his godson's remarkable intelligence, and when, as a schoolboy at Westminster, he proved to be fully as brilliant as Thorburn had always said he was, his godfather's pride became pathetic; people smiled at it behind his back. Infuriating. And now look at the fellow, thought Clarke-dandified breeches, shirt like a biscuit, hair hanging over his collarwa-a-ah. . . . He was shrewd enough with himself to admit that he would have disliked the fellow less if Heron had been less cool during a singularly unpleasant raid. Showing off, of course, he thought quickly. The thought pleased him.

"Ah, my boy," he said, grinning, "you're cut out of finer material than two old animals like us. If you weren't, you'd be a soldier, not a writer. Writing—eh? It must be a damned wearing life."

Uncertain whether he were being laughed at or not, Heron drawled,

"It has its points."

"No doubt, no doubt," said Clarke, in a submissive voice. "If it hadn't, you wouldn't have chosen it."

Heron swallowed a yawn.

"It chose me."

"We were never in any difficulty about his career," Thorburn said. (Exasperated, Clarke thought: Does he know how fatuous that sounds?) "He knew what he was going to do and went for it. And, thank God," he added, looking with calm pride at Heron, "you're taking your career with you. You might have had to begin again."

A nervous twitch deepened the lines on Heron's face, too many of them for his age—at thirty-five he had the cracked skin of an old woman: when he smiled, his lips moved only at one side, with distorting effect. His mouth was delicate and very small: from a wide forehead, his face narrowed to this short peevish mouth and pointed chin.

"Yes-but shall I be able to write in America? It's a different language."

The general rolled in his chair, impatient and loving.

"Rubbish, my dear, rubbish. They read your books now, don't they? Don't talk nonsense. . . . Where's your wife?"

"Upstairs, with Nick. His supper disagreed with him. He's over-excited."

"It was stupid to make him eat it," Thorburn said, vexed. "He didn't want anything."

"Lord knows what's wrong with children nowadays," Clarke jeered. "I was brought up like a healthy young dog, beaten, kicked round, up till all hours, never a lick of water on me lower than my neck, and what was put on the table for th'others to eat, I ate it—I was stronger and a damn sight saner than these unique models—washed and trimmed every

day. Mind you, I'm not saying a word against Nick. He's a nice lad."

He broke off as Emil Breuner came into the room. He came in very quietly, and strolled towards them with an air of reserve; not that he looked nervous—on the contrary, he was very much at his ease—but as though he were hardly aware that there were people in the room. Heron being nearest him when he noticed them, or noticed they were people he knew, he said gently and politely,

"I think we shall stay here to-night—don't you think so?"
"I'm afraid we shall," Heron answered.

Breuner looked at him for the first time, smiling. He smiled charmingly, with his whole face.

"You are anxious to go?"

"Aren't we all?" said Heron coldly.

Clarke made sounds between a laugh and a strangled groan. "I don't know that I am . . . if I could stay here in peace."

Abruptly, with the quite unconscious arrogance he felt towards foreigners, however distinguished—and even when he happened to like them—Thorburn said,

"You've had some experience of going into exile. What's the best thing about it?"

"The best?" Breuner said. "Most people would ask: What is the worst? . . . The best . . . I don't know—I think—to possess nothing any more. Nothing but your mind and your hands." Looking absently at Heron again, he said, "You are very fortunate. You do not need even any tools to go on with your work."

"You'll be quite safe yourself, won't you?" said Heron.

Breuner did not appear to notice the younger man's wish to snub him. Either he was so preoccupied that his thoughts protected him, or he was unused to discourtesy, and did not recognise it. With a serious air, he said,

"I think there will be some work; I hope so."

Unable not to make mischief—he did it even when it might damage himself—Clarke interrupted,

"If the general here had his way, you'd be in jug, with the rest of your breed."

"Indeed?" Breuner turned to Thorburn with something of the eager radiance of a child who has been told he must be polite to grown people, and can't help being surprised by the inexplicable way they behave. "You don't care for scientists?"

"To tell you the truth," Thorburn said roughly, "I don't. You've spoiled soldiering—made it a filthy business, no better than butchering. A slaughter of the innocents. For all I know—thanks to your senseless curiosity—the world will never be fit to live in again."

"It's not entirely the scientists' fault," drawled Heron.

"It is not more my fault than yours," Breuner said. "If you could silence all curiosity, the human race also would be quite silent. It would become an animal. And—being a weak animal—it would die out."

"We are but little children weak . . ." Clarke sang-croaked.

"Children can be murderers," Breuner said, almost gaily. "But, it is really very fortunate, until they are shown they don't know how to do it effectively. . . . Humanity was a great risk. To arrive somewhere, it had to be inquisitive. Now, simply to have a chance to live, to exist"—he hesitated —"we shall have to climb down, not be so greedy . . . I don't know. It may be too late."

"I confess," Heron said, "I find your—I don't know whether it's stoicism or egoism—or if there's any difference between them—irritating."

Breuner glanced at him with his friendly smile.

"I am sorry."

Something in the way Thorburn got up and walked across the room to the open doorway silenced the others. They—even Breuner—watched him. He stood there, head lowered, as if he wanted to charge the airfield, his shapeless untidy body rigid. Seeming to divide round him, the light entered the room in two streams, faintly bronzed, reflecting the dry grass between the runways. It was far from the dark in the room, nor was it light: everything was visible and nothing quite clear; when the general turned round, his face in this light had the greyness of a stone.

"You think we're finished, do you?" he said to Breuner. "I mean us, not—not the rest."

Breuner considered him for a moment, with what might have been pity if it had been less detached, less tranquilly unmoved. He might have been asking himself: How much can he bear? Or: What does he understand? More likely—since even after twenty years in the country he still had difficulty in forcing the whole of his thought into English words—he was only anxious not to make any mistakes. Dishonesty, even unwilling, is an unforgivable sin.

"No. I am not so pessimistic," he said softly. "It is true— England is defeated; and all Europe is defeated. The defeat has gone too far now to be stopped." In his careful voice, each word was distinct. "But Europe had collapsed already, before the barbarians began moving across it. It died its own death. Now, as barbarians do, they will destroy out of suspicion and ignorance-or just from impatience. When they don't understand they will lose patience, and kill things or people . . . cities-Paris, Florence, London-villages . . . the cathedrals, Chartres, St. Paul's . . . the great libraries-invaders always destroy libraries. Besides-in a sense barbarians are puritans, don't you think? Anything very beautiful alarms them-as well as the things they don't understand. So they will distrust and kill writers, schoolmasters, professors, doctors, along with the millions of humbler people. There will be ironies as well as terror. A great poet will die so obscurely that no one will ever know how or where, and they will move men and women, and children, about Europe in herds-I remember a friend of mine once saw hundreds of Polish women and children being driven out of their village: he said they turned their eyes as they walked just like other cattle. . . . Things will break down and there will be famines and typhus. Some intellectuals will survive, they will work for the barbarians, as educated Romans did. And Europe will survive. It will not of course be Europe as we know it. It will be broken up and each of the fragments struggling to exist. And then-after a long time-perhaps a century, or two centuries-the corruption will begin. I don't mean of Europe-that will be over. I mean of the barbarians." He smiled as if to himself, a quick bright smile. "Instead of burning the old manuscripts he has found, a young man will keep them, and read them secretly at night. Or a clever hard-headed official will be bewitched by an old house, or perhaps the ruins of Chartres will stretch out a hand to take hold of him . . . "Or, he thought soberly, history itself will betray him: some evening as light as this, when he is walking by the Thames or the Seine-or some village stream without even a name—its drowned memories will seize their chance to glide into his brain and avenge themselves—and us—by weakening him . . . "A workman digging for something useful will break through into an air-raid shelter and find a famous painting its owner hid there. For people who never saw anything like it, it will be blinding. They will begin—it will be very rash of them—to trust beautiful things; they will have forgotten that these things burn you. Corruption will do its work, the seeds will grow in it—the passion we Europeans feel for—for discovery . . . I think only Europeans, none of the others . . ."

He hesitated, and forgot to finish what he was saying. His thoughts went on silently a little further. . . . We shall set out again; there will be curiosity, a resurrection—life, so old, millennially old, and new, dangerous, a birth. But we know where it will lead, he thought.

"We shan't see it," Thorburn said harshly.

Breuner hurried back from the distance he kept, without knowing it, between himself and others—except, always except his wife.

"No, of course not," he agreed smilingly. "It will, I think, be rather dark now for some time. Of course"—his smile became brilliant—"if you are living in it, it will be light enough. When I think of the ninth century I always see a child, a boy, looking up at a—how do you call it?—a may tree."

"You do, do you?" exclaimed Clarke. He had listened with a vacant face, his eyes closed: the moment he opened them you saw the wily sensible devil in him, who never slept, and was (do they say?) not bad at heart, spring joyously up. "I'm sure you're right, old boy, but it's beyond me. All I know is, we're in a hell of a mess—it's a bad business. I could put it shorter, but I won't"—he leered slyly at Heron—"not with these masters of prose about."

Ignoring him, Heron spoke to Breuner with marked civility.

"I've no doubt you're right. It's exactly what I feel myself. Those of us who are, as you say, the future, should take our minds and our knowledge to as safe a distance as possible."

Breuner looked at him in surprise.

"I don't think I-" he began.

He was interrupted. The door behind them opened sharply, and Colonel Lackland came in. He might just have got out of bed, he was alert and bubbling with energy: his pale eye—it had a remarkably small pupil—was bright, almost gay. On his heels, detaching himself so far as a slouching walk could do it from this briskness, was Kent.

Lackland halted in front of the general.

"This officer has been talking to me, sir. He has something to tell us."

Thorburn glanced without moving his head at the young man.

"Oh, yes?" he said heavily. "What is it?"

Kent answered in a respectful and very cool voice. He was able to remain cool by saying to himself: I'm in charge here, not these passengers.

"It's about your passages, sir. The fact is—the aircraft we expect won't take all of you. It will only take five. Counting the child, there are eight of you. That means"—he hesitated briefly—"three people won't be able to go."

"What did you say?" asked Thorburn. "Eight of us? Counting you, there are twelve, not eight."

Kent smiled slightly.

"You don't count us, sir. But there are still three too many of you."

From the corner of his eye he had watched Mrs. Heron come in. She must have heard what he said, but she made no sign that it alarmed her. Perhaps, he thought, she hasn't taken it in. She did not speak to anyone, but in some way the others, who had been sitting about untidily, displaced persons in a comfortless waiting-room, now became a group, almost of friends, its centre this plain charming woman. She walked quickly across the room and seated herself on the arm of her husband's chair. He was disturbed all right; he sat up with a jerk of his elegant shoulders, and spoke to Kent as he might have dealt with an incompetent batman.

"You didn't say this at first."

"I didn't want to knock you down with it the minute you arrived," Kent said.

Heron's sallow skin turned dark in patches.

"Nor have you explained it. Why, may I ask, can't we all go?"

His wife had laid her arm along the back of his chair; she allowed her hand to drop so that its fingers touched him. With an air of patience and forbearance, speaking very slowly, Kent said,

"The aircraft has to carry extra fuel tanks. They add to the weight. This means that five passengers is the limit. If I were to put any more of you on, it simply wouldn't get airborne."

"Then, in heaven's name, why not use a larger plane?"

"One reason is that a larger aircraft would need a larger airfield. As it is"—he had begun to enjoy himself—"you have

to know every inch of the field—it has very few inches—so that you needn't drop below the cliffs before you start to climb."

The general interrupted him, brusquely, frowning.

"What is the aeroplane?"

"An Anson, sir. Obsolescent communications aircraft. Small twin-engine low-wing monoplane—"

Good-humoured, suave, if a bear can be suave, the general broke in again.

"This, you know, isn't a children's class in spotting aeroplanes."

Kent smiled at him ingenuously.

"No . . . I'm very sorry, sir."

"The only point of any interest," observed Heron, "apart from wondering whether you know what you're talking about, is whether the thing is safe."

At any other moment Kent would have repaid with fury the insolence of the other's manner. But, glancing at him, he thought: Why, he's positively bilious with nerves—and poor devil, why not? Maliciously, he gave Heron the full benefit of his sympathy.

"You needn't worry about that. Once you're off the ground you'll be all right." And down in Iceland and off it again, he thought a little grimly.

"Do we fly direct?" asked Thorburn.

"No, sir. You'll touch down in Iceland, Greenland, Labrador. It's a regular route—the northern route."

"Is it still open?" Clarke put in quietly.

It would be you who thought of that one, Kent said to himself. He met with deliberate candour the brigadier's shrewd little eyes, glaring mercilessly into his, and said briefly,

"So far as I know."

"In any case," Thorburn said, impatient, "we have to take our chance on it?"

"Yes, sir, I'm afraid so," answered Kent.

He noticed Mrs. Heron, when her husband was about to speak, try by laying her hand on his shoulder to distract him—without any luck: he looked at her with a weary severity, lifting his eyebrows, and spoke with a sarcasm the young man would have resented more if it had not struck him as ridiculous.

"We're getting away from this question of only five passengers, aren't we? If a little energy were used, I daresay something could be done about it."

There was a pause.

"I would prefer in any case not to go," Breuner said quietly.

"My good man, if only one person could go it should and will be you," Thorburn said. He frowned. "You'll be of more value over there than any of us. Enough, that's enough," he said impatiently, seeing that Breuner was preparing to argue. Breuner was silent.

Grinning a little, like a cunning good-natured old fox, Clarke said,

"I can't believe that our young Nick counts as a person. And you can leave me out and welcome."

"Shut up," Thorburn growled.

"All right, all right. . . . Send out the boys of the old brigade, They made old England free-hee . . . But sending them to America—no, no, that's going too far."

Thorburn turned his head towards Kent.

"Tell me, my boy. Before we rolled up here—you'd had a definite order to go yourselves? Eh?"

Staring at him, the young man said,

"Definite orders have been fairly hard to come by, sir, these last two weeks. There was a general order for all personnel to leave." What the hell does he think, the old ape? he wondered bitterly.

Throughout this talk about the aeroplane, Colonel Lackland had been standing with an expression so tensely of energy at bay that when he spoke it had all the effect of a rifle going off in their ears. Heron winced as though he had been trodden on, and leaned back, closing his eyes.

"May I say something, sir?"

The general did not look up.

"Yes? Well?"

"I ought now, I think, to give you certain information . . . a scheme—"

"Oh, heaven help us," Clarke interrupted him, "I thought we'd got shut of those for a bit."

"This one hardly concerns you, sir," said the colonel icily. He turned to Thorburn again. "I should like the others in, sir. May I send Pilot-Officer Kent to fetch them?"

"Run along and get them, my boy," Thorburn muttered. He let Kent reach the door, and shouted, "And let's have some light here."

"The electricity isn't running, sir," Kent told him. "We have a lamp or two, though. I'll see about it."

He went out. The general glanced heavily round at the others.

"They expected to go, of course."

"We have spoiled their chances," murmured Breuner. "It seems a pity."

Heron opened his eyes slowly and painfully, as though he would gladly have slept for weeks.

"I have no doubt they'll fix something up for themselves." Clarke's little eyes shone with a spiteful joy.

"Birdie wait a little longer, Until little wings grow stronger, Then fly away," he said in a jeering voice. "What an optimist you are for other people, my dear Heron."

Before Heron could retort, Kent, with Marriot and Cordelia, came back. Behind them was Smith, carrying an oil lamp only just lit. He set it down on a table and turned the wick up, fiddling with it for a moment, until the light sprang up and out, making a harsh circle round their faces and thickening the web of shadows waiting above and behind them in the low room. Now what had been half-light became darkness—except outside, on the airfield, never in June darker than it was now, the horizon gone, but a soft watery glow springing away on all sides as though spouted from the sea. Smith went back into the passage and took a second lamp from Hutton, placing it behind Breuner on the desk.

Perhaps because he had moved quietly, to stand, some way from the others, against this desk, Breuner saw them with an extreme clearness. The three that to himself he called the young air ones were together, distinct and together. Kent had propped himself against the back of a chair where the other boy sprawled, legs crossed, the ankle of one resting on his knee, his useless arm hanging; the girl sat awkwardly on one of the small chairs, her hands folded; profiled on the darkness, her smooth cheek, the long line of her jaw, fine nostrils, startled Breuner; he had seen it before, and after a

moment he remembered where—the decrepit twelfth century church in a French village, and the figure of an angel with the joyful head of a girl, modelled, obviously from life. . . . Thorburn was sitting with the light full on his powerful nose and big arched forehead. Why is he a soldier? Breuner wondered; some other form of discipline would surely have suited him better? . . . Mrs. Heron had moved to a couch and put her feet up, long shapely legs crossed—charming—a charm also modelled from life. Her husband drew his chair nearer, and she smiled at him, a friendly smile. . . . A prudence that was second nature had sent Hutton and the other fellow to stand side by side at the back of the room, where they could see without being seen.

Lifting his head, Thorburn asked,

"Well, Colonel Lackland? What d'you want to say?"

"In the first place, sir, that I'm not coming to America. I intended to tell you so nearer the time."

The general looked at him with some distaste.

"Oh, did you?"

Quite unmoved, Lackland went on in the same even tone, "The fact is, sir, I have different orders. My job is to stay here and take part in organising a Home Army—it will have some points of resemblance, perhaps not a great many, with what used to be known, in our last war, as the maquis. You may remember, sir, I had a good deal of experience on those lines. It was, though I didn't know it then, a sort of rehearsal for this. Supplies will be dropped to us in the same way, and we shall base ourselves in country where we can feed ourselves, at least partly. You won't expect me to go into details—I'll only say that we shall be justifying ourselves if we make it necessary for the invader to keep half a million troops here

to look after us." He stopped abruptly, and sent a sharp glance round their faces. "I think that all of you," he went on, in a lower voice, "even those of you who were children in the last war, have some picture in your minds of the sort of resistance proposed."

No one spoke for a moment; then Thorburn said, with a curiously sorrowful reluctance, as if the words had to climb a long way and push aside a great deal of earth,

"Well. I must say I expected something like this—but I didn't know it was under way already."

"Is it?" asked Heron.

Lackland stared at him.

"What exactly do you mean?"

Heron appeared to choose his words carefully.

"Is it anything more than a-slightly fantastic idea?"

"I'm not in the habit of taking up fantastic ideas," Lackland said.

Thorburn silenced them both by striking the flat of his hand noisily against his chair. He made an effort to ignore the mild dislike he had always felt for this one of his officers. What displeased him in the fellow were the very qualities that made Lackland a first-class soldier—his single-mindedness and his complete indifference towards people and objects he could not use. He would feel no grief if, in order to make a strong point of it, he had to destroy an old beautiful house or an abbey. Yet Thorburn was ashamed of not liking the man—there was so much in him you could admire: he was incorruptibly honest, brave, in his way kind, and, with all his intelligence, simple. Thorburn forced himself to speak warmly.

"I must confess, Lackland, I don't see that you can hope

to have here the success—if I may say so, very meagre, the form wasn't very good—of the resistance some of the European countries put up during the last war. And would they have done it at all if this particular bridgehead . . . if this island hadn't been unconquered and uninvaded? What d'you think?"

Lackland's voice sharpened.

"We're counting on the very fact, sir, that Europe doesn't exist. . . . No one can handle a breakdown that size—no administration, however ruthless, could do it. In any case, ruthlessness is not another name for efficiency, as I happen to know—"

"Ah, you know everything," interrupted Clarke, with a sour smile.

The colonel ignored him.

"The remoter areas, and difficult bits of country, will break away—or be left alone. It's not impossible—certainly it's not fantastic"—something like a smile flashed across his broad face—"to think that a strong force, airborne, can clear at least England and Scotland and hold them as an outpost."

Heron was shaken out of his composure.

"My God," he cried, "an outpost of what?"

"No," Thorburn said, "no, it's not impossible." He rubbed his head furiously—he had very few gestures; this one did duty with him for excitement, pleasure, doubt, nearly every emotion, in fact, except anger—and repeated, "Not by any means impossible."

When the colonel was explaining himself, Breuner had watched the young air ones. Kent and the girl did not move; he stared with a stupid almost morose face at Lackland: she sat with bent head, and only once glanced up, during

Lackland's speech; for less than a second she looked at Kent, her eyes dilated by, yes, fear-of what? Breuner wondered. His attention was caught suddenly by the other young man. Leaning forward in his chair, the sergeant-pilot was listening with a vivid interest; his eyes were darkened by it and brilliant, his hands trembled slightly. He was at this moment extraordinarily attractive, but the sight of his burned clawlike fingers twitching distressed Breuner. He looked away. . . . Lackland was talking again. He had stepped back so that he was outside the ring of light thrown by the lamps. Light of a sort fell on him from the open door; he was standing stiffly, his short sturdy body drawn very slightly back; in this calm white northern darkness his face with its black patch seemed paler, and the blue of his eye colder and lighter. But he has become, Breuner thought, anonymous-yes, anonymous. The thought struck him then that so must the English soldier always have looked to the eyes of continentals like himself-during the Hundred Years' War-and before that. He is a gesture this country has always been making, he said to himself, not an individual. Yet this is perhaps the last time, and I am the last who will see him-see that coolly observant glance, not unkind, not much interested, not stupid -heavens no, not stupid . . .

Lackland was speaking with less self-confidence, in a lower voice.

"Put it at its very worst, sir—it means that some of us will be free as long as we live. One of the crofters up here, or a man farming the lost end of a Yorkshire dale, or a Cornishman, opening his door at night to a quiet knock, will talk for a few minutes to a man who answers by talking about freedom. At the worst, we shall be a few men digging this word freedom into soil used to it—" he made an abrupt gesture, instantly cut short. "A country doesn't hand over its memories to an invader, you know . . . And apart from that—if we're wiped out there'll be someone, perhaps a child, one child, who will remember hearing one of us use the word, and he'll repeat it to his children—and so on. It's a word you can't kill so long as it's even spoken—"

Without meaning to, Breuner said aloud,

"Yes, I agree."

"You're not English, are you?" said Lackland.

"No. I came from Europe." He smiled without a trace of bitterness. "You shouldn't despise Europe. It can still, I think, teach you a little it has learned by suffering it."

In his normally sharp confident voice, the colonel said, "Oh, quite."

Thorburn interrupted him.

"I take it you weren't going to talk about this, were you?"

"No, sir, I wasn't. I had no orders to keep back anyone here. In the circumstances—it bears directly on the problem of the aeroplane—I'll take the responsibility." He hesitated very briefly, sent a detached alert glance round them, and went on, "Certain of us must go. If you don't mind my saying so, you, sir, and Brigadier Clarke, are too old for the maquis. Professor Breuner is, I believe, absolutely essential. That's three passengers. It leaves two places. Obviously the child must go—and the child's mother. If the boy is not counted as a passenger, one other person can go as well." He looked at the girl. "You, Miss—er—"

Cordelia looked back at him with a sullen dislike.

"I'm not going," she said.

The colonel's glance flickered over Marriot's useless arm

and hand. A lively mocking smile came on the young man's face, but before he could jump into an imprudence Kent said hurriedly,

"My orders are to send away essential people and V.I.P.'s. Jock—I mean Flying-Officer Henderson, the pilot—will decide whether the child counts as one passenger. Probably not."

There was a brief pause. From the back of the room, Hutton said, in his quiet dragging voice, awkward and decisive, "I s'd like to go along with you, sir."

He had moved a little forward, and the light showed that he was blushing, right over his face and neck to the roots of his hair—hair the lightest colour of flax, and eyebrows and eyelashes still lighter, no colour in them at all. He had small blue eyes, now starting out of his head with embarrassment, but he knew what he was saying.

"Right," Lackland said. "I expect young men to stay." Rather less curtly, he went on, "Older men won't be able to adapt themselves to a life which isn't merely hard—but may be, yes, ugly."

Used by this man, the word startled Breuner.

"What did you say?" he exclaimed.

"I was present once," Lackland said, slowly, "during the war—I mean the last war—when four young Frenchmen decided to shoot a fifth. They had known each other since they were children—they were from the same village. If I may say so, it was unpleasant. It could happen here—I've no doubt it will."

"Yes," murmured Breuner, "yes, it is ugly."

A silence. With barely repressed annoyance, Heron said,

"It's possible for even a farce to be ugly."

Lackland eyed him with a sudden mischievous gaiety.

"You feel it would be undignified to take part in it? Well, well, we can't all play Hamlet."

"Why Hamlet? You'd prefer, I suppose, a showier and more imposing role for yourself."

"Ah, but I'm not a genius," retorted Lackland merrily—delighted. "I don't have to carry myself about carefully for fear I spill over."

"I agree—too much intelligence would be a nuisance to you," drawled Heron. "But you'll need more than I believe you have if you're not to kill thousands of unfortunate young men clumsily and very stupidly."

"That's enough," Thorburn said sternly. "The most sensible thing we can do now is to go to bed. Elizabeth—be off with you."

"Sleep on it, eh?" Clarke yawned and groaned.

"Certainly. We can't get away to-night."

"Perhaps the aeroplane will not come," Breuner said in his slow quiet voice: he was speaking to himself.

Mrs. Heron gave a cry of horror, startling them. They looked at her, Kent with annoyance and disapproval. She controlled herself at once.

"No, I'm sorry," she murmured.

"It will be all right," said Kent, vexed. "Jock has never let anyone down yet." He glared at her. "Never. . . . Excuse me, sir," he added, looking angrily at Thorburn. He turned and walked out. Glancing at each other, Marriot and the girl slipped after him.

Shambling across to the door open on to the airfield, the

general stood there, turning his back on the others. He had had enough of them. He heard them leaving, but did not move: his uncouth body, hands clasped loosely behind his back, head sunk, filled the doorway. A breath of wind touched his scalp through the matted hair: after a moment he made out the edge of the cliff, a ragged line drawn on the darkness of the sea; the sky was less dark, there were clouds on it waiting their time to thicken into a dazzling whiteness. For a moment he smelled bog myrtle; it vanished, then came again. His eyes and ears were still those of a child born and nurtured in a village: he heard the thin sound made by the reeds scraping the wall of the house; a small bird or a frog jumped twice, close to him, then all was still; the undermurmur of the sea below the cliff, the weak rustling of tiny insects in the roots of the grass, came and went like a gentle breath. Familiar sounds as they were, they kept a respectful distance from him, held back by a grief he could share with no one-would not dream of trying to share. Between him and the past, cutting off all memories with the same severity -so that last summer and the first he remembered were both now part of a legend-stood the fact of defeat. He could neither blink it away nor accept it. Merely to have known, along with a number of people, that in certain quite probable conditions, the island could not be held, was no help. And worst of all-so much worse that he felt: If it were only defeat-the withdrawal . . . Call it what you like, he thought bitterly, it is no different from deserting, no better. A few thousands, perhaps, had been taken off, rulers, administrators, mechanics, fighting men, the strongest, the youngest, the most able, and the rest, millions of them, left. The desertion

and abandonment of the English people—of the country itself, with its fields, its shores, its buried footsteps and voices . . . He recalled an evening, at the end of a week's infantry exercises on the Plain, when he had taken an American observer to stay the night with him in his own house in Stockbridge. They reached the village just before dark, the downs folding in softly behind it, the one only street empty, and the river, the Test, looking greener and clearer than he had said it was—he had never seen it look so well. Why, it could be New Hampshire or Connecticut, his guest said. . . . Do you mean to tell me, he had answered—and only now felt the arrogance of his words—that you have anything like this in your country? . . . He did not believe it. And if it were true, if he were taken and shown it, what good? Not being English, it would be no more to him than the next stream.

Before he could save himself, he saw his village, the wide street, the Test, waiting, as at this moment they waited . . . He turned sharply round.

He was not, as he had thought, alone. Clarke was still there, and met the frown he got with a look of astonishing simplicity.

"What the devil d'you think you're doing?" demanded Thorburn.

"What d'you think you're doing?"

Before Thorburn answered, there was the sound, a great way off, of aeroplanes—not very many. He listened to it.

"Hear them?"

"Yes. They'll be ours," Clarke murmured.

"Leaving."

To-day, to-morrow, in a day or two, it would really be the

last planes: looking down, the airman would see fields, the coast, the rocks and sand below the edge of the sea, then a shadow, then nothing.

"It's only dark for about an hour up here, isn't it?" said Clarke.

THE NEXT DAY, BETWEEN FOUR in the afternoon and five, Elizabeth Heron came into the room. She had been looking for her husband, but he was not here, no one was here, and she stood, turning over the stained and torn pages of magazines, unable to make up her mind to seek him outside. The heat was too great; the sun, burning behind a fine drifting mist, drew the strength out of her; she felt tired and oppressed. Nicholas, who could stand any sun, was out of doors with Hutton: she could hear his clear voice and Hutton's answering murmur.

Cordelia came in, hesitated. She admired the older woman sincerely, less the charming gaiety with which she moved even her hands, than another trick she had—was it a trick?—of seeming to enjoy the company of people and of things so simply and easily that the dullest must be happy with her. With so many human beings, the things round them are not at their ease; they feel unwelcome and out of place. Mrs. Heron had only to walk across a room for it to enjoy a modest confidence. Even this room.

She looked round, smiled at Cordelia, and held out a page in one of the papers.

"Do look at this. Cherry-trees in Kent, only two months ago—sunlight, white petals—children. What a warm early spring we had! Shall we ever be so happy?"

The girl had no answer ready.

"I don't know." Can I ask her? she thought—shall I? "We've had no rain here for weeks—and usually it rains a lot."

"I can't remember, can you, a better year for them? Our trees were white from head to foot. Nick stared his eyes out —it's the first spring he's noticed."

"Yes-it seems all wrong."

No one would have asked himself whether Mrs. Heron were beautiful or not. In fact she was plain, and charming and delightful—and would be when she was ninety.

"Do you think so? Haven't you ever noticed—it's always when a country is at its best that things happen to it? Weeks of perfect weather, sun, cloudless skies, lilac, cherry-trees, no one is ill, even old people wake up feeling lighter than usual, there are more boys born than girls, the days are the clearest anyone ever saw, the nights warm and quiet—and then, nearly without any interval, war."

Cordelia felt without envy that the older woman was much too intelligent for her. How ignorant I am, she thought, and how dull. It was of no importance, and she had other things on her mind.

"I expect you're right," she murmured.

"Isn't it rather unusual you've heard nothing of the plane? I thought—wireless and all that?"

She caught the thread of anxiety in Mrs. Heron's careless tone; it made her feel less inadequate.

"Oh, no," she reassured her, "he has to keep quiet; you couldn't have him chattering about where he is, telling everybody. They're not interested in a single unimportant plane, but still . . . Of course he'll come."

Elizabeth did not speak for a moment, then said, "You're a pilot yourself, aren't you? Do you like it?" "No. I hate flying."

"Really. Then why?"

She tried hurriedly to think why she had chosen to train as a pilot. Because it was unusual and rather dashing? When her mother said, "Cordelia is going off to-morrow to begin training as a pilot," people who had always known her glanced at her with surprised interest. But it was not so unusual as all that, two of her own school friends . . . Because she wanted to reassure herself that she could do it? Because it was, after all, the most exciting, the best thing that offered? No, it must be much simpler than that. She had never asked herself why she was doing it—there are so many questions one must ask before it is necessary to fall back on questioning oneself. Certainly this was not the time: she said politely,

"I don't know."

"If you hate it, didn't that make it more difficult to learn?"

"Oh, no." The warmth in Mrs. Heron's voice made her curiosity tolerable, even kind. "If you expect to like it very much, you're less—less respectful, and that usually ends badly." Hesitating a little, she said, "I don't hate it—that was very silly. It's a job, like any other."

"You're very brave," said Mrs. Heron, smiling. "I should never have the courage to fly."

Cordelia did not answer. Either I speak to her now, or it will be too late, she thought; I mayn't get another chance. She was trembling, and she remembered at this moment that she had dreamed something like this the night before the first of her parachute jumps when she was training—a nightmare; not a dream.

"I wanted to talk to you about the aeroplane." She paused, and went on, "Nicholas is very light, I'm sure he won't count as a passenger, but he does weigh something. That leaves—with you and the three old men—one possible place. That will be for Major Heron—if he's going."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows.

"But, Miss Hugh-Brown, surely there'll be room for you? You're very light, too."

"An aeroplane isn't a lorry," she said drily.

"Of course not-stupid of me-I thought it was."

She felt herself blushing.

"Forgive me, I'm sorry."

"What's the matter, my child?"

She noticed that Mrs. Heron had avoided saying anything about her husband—whether he were going or not. With a resolute calm, she said,

"It's not easy to tell you—to tell anyone. I should like—I have a particular reason—I should like to go."

"Explain to me," said Mrs. Heron gently.

"In six months—yes, it will be six months—my—my son will be born."

"You're sure, are you, child, that it will be a son?"

"Of course. You said yourself—" she broke off—realising, just in time, that she was being led along a diversion she had started herself. "I'm being very silly," she muttered. She

waited. Mrs. Heron did not speak. She had to go on. "That has nothing to do with it. The point is—since Jock was able to come back for us—and pilots were ordered to go, they'll be needed—it seemed perfectly all right."

After a minute, Elizabeth said,

"Forgive me-are you married?"

Cordelia looked at her without speaking. She was not vexed: an impulse not her own kept her silent—coming perhaps from that slow-thinking obstinate man, her father, master in his ship and his home.

"I ought not to ask. It's Mr. Kent, isn't it? You're both terribly young—it's impossible, and besides I haven't a shadow of right to blame either of you."

No, you have no right, thought Cordelia. She said slowly, "If we married I should have had to leave the Station. We didn't want to be separated. And the last few weeks, of course, have been impossible; we've been hard at it sending scientists and their equipment away from Garra House, and fetching their families to a few of them—and all that."

"You meant to get married over there?"

She hesitated a long time, ashamed and angry, then said, "Yes."

Mrs. Heron lifted both her hands, palms upward.

"It needs courage to bring a child into the world now."

"Yes. We were wrong."

"I didn't say that, child," answered Elizabeth swiftly.

"No, you didn't say it." She was, she knew it, being uncouth and graceless. The older woman's kindness, and her seductive voice and manner, were a sword in the hands of a skilled fencer. She could do nothing against it, except behave

like a sullen schoolgirl in front of a charming and very clever headmistress.

"What do you want me to do?" Mrs. Heron asked.

Hesitating again,

"Couldn't you persuade one of the old gentlemen not to go?"

Mrs. Heron smiled.

"Didn't you, when you came in, mean to ask me whether my husband was going? He's not a soldier, you know, Miss Hugh-Brown. You'd hardly call Intelligence soldiering—or would you? He's a writer."

Cordelia looked at her, waiting.

"He's one of the people they would kill as soon as they caught him."

Now we're getting somewhere, she thought. She no longer felt baffled, and said coolly,

"Why should either of the old generals go? They can't possibly be needed. There are hundreds of generals."

"My poor child," Mrs. Heron said, "there are thousands of young women in this country, waiting for sons to be born to them."

Anger flamed in her, behind her eyes; her knees shook.

"Any one of them is more important than two distinguished old men."

"You want both of them to stay behind?"

Controlling herself, she said,

"What use is it for me to go to America alone? After all . . . we shouldn't be living safe lives, the war will go on, and I shall be the wife of a fighter pilot. Do you think—"

Elizabeth interrupted her in a light voice, with the same air of simplicity and kindness.

"How stupid I've been. Forgive me. I forgot—oh, but surely, wouldn't it be the simplest thing in the world for you to call yourself Mrs. Kent? Who would doubt it? And you know—surely you know?—I'd help you to make it seem all right, and in any way."

The girl was silent. She did not feel embarrassed or afraid, although she was forced now to make a humiliating confession. It seemed to her that in a few minutes she had aged by so many years. She was not even nervous.

"I was lying," she said distinctly. "Andrew and I were married a month ago, in Garra village—by the Presbyterian minister."

A scarcely noticeable pause.

"How wise. But-my dear child-I don't understand why you-misled me."

Cordelia looked at her steadily.

"Oh, I'm sure you do, Mrs. Heron. You know very well that I wanted you to think it was important for Andrew to go with me—if I go. If I'd told you the truth—that I can't live without him—that means nothing."

"No, no, it means everything," Elizabeth said warmly.

Now, she thought.

"Then help me."

Without knowing it, she had moved nearer Mrs. Heron. She realised it suddenly, finding herself looking closely at the other woman's face, so plain and flawed, the skin almost coarse, and so charming. She stepped back.

A strange calm smile crossed Mrs. Heron's face.

"Do I seem to you old?"

"No."

Smiling, lifting her hands, Elizabeth said,

"Of course I do. When I was a girl, any woman over thirty seemed to me old and haggard. Certainly past feeling much. But, you know, to General Thorburn—who, by the way, is sixty, not a hundred and sixty—George and I still seem young. And he would be rather surprised if we let him stay on here, alone."

Cordelia shivered as you do when a goose walks over your grave. Until this moment she had not known that she hoped. "Yes, I see."

"What, my dear? What do you see?"

"You won't help me because—because if both the generals stood down, it would be morally impossible for Major Heron to go—though there would be room . . . But it's not impossible at all. If the old men stayed, and he went, he would be hurt in his vanity. Nothing else."

Elizabeth made one of her light gestures.

"You think it's as simple as that? My poor child, even at your age I knew that men never outlive their vanity. George is devoted to me, he depends on me—and he would leave me in less than a year if I were the other person who knew he had behaved badly. Don't look at me like that. Could you live with a mirror that made you squint? Of course not."

Cordelia did not—it was still so new a friend—know what on earth to do with her despair. She stood clumsily with it.

"I see it's no use," she said. She hesitated, and repeated, "No use."

Quickly,

"But perhaps we're exaggerating everything," Elizabeth said. "There may be no occupation, or only a partial one. Almost certainly—if the war ends now, if they decide to make peace instead of dragging it on—people will be allowed

to get out, you'll be able to leave England in the ordinary way. Or to stay here and work. You're both so young. And neither of you is, as my husband is, known—you're not, I mean, people anyone would notice."

"If Major Heron had been worth it," Cordelia said quietly. "But a man like that—who will leave you if you offend his vanity . . . A marriage like that—"

She turned and went out on to the airfield. Mrs. Heron moved as though she were going to hurry after her, stopped, and seeing Emil Breuner sauntering towards the house, ran the other way, to be out of the room before he reached it.

Breuner had seen her, but not that she was running away. Infinitely curious about people's minds, they could behave under his eyes with the most astonishing eccentricity, he would never notice it. His work, his speculations, used up his energies; in them he lived the single-pointed life of a child, and for the rest did more or less as he was told, dressed himself carefully, ate when he was told to come and eat. Because he was gay and sweet-tempered he had a great many friends; he enjoyed seeing them—he and his wife . . . Thinking about her, making the difficult effort to detach her from himself in his mind, to see her alone, she who had been only—only!—his feminine half, memory, warmth, sister, he stood absently at the table, his hand running through magazines without telling him. The young sergeant-pilot, coming in noisily, startled him. He swung round.

"I'm sorry. I made you jump, I'm awfully sorry," Marriot apologised.

"Don't be sorry," he said quickly, "this is your room. We give you a lot of trouble."

"Not at all."

"Well, I think so." This one of the three young air people struck him as intelligent, he would like to talk to him. Find out what he thought when he thought of the future. He was drawn to the young man, warmly, but his feeling was not answered—there was a perceptible barrier.

"The plane will be here to-day, and take you off."

"Are you sure it comes?"

A gleam of mockery came into Marriot's eyes without spoiling their look of intelligence and gentleness—detached uninterested gentleness.

"Of course it'll come. You're anxious to get clear?"

"No," he said.

"In your place I should be. You wouldn't be comfortable here," Marriot said.

Faintly surprised—by the undertone of familiarity—he considered this for a moment.

"Well, perhaps not. But I was thinking—you and your friends must resent our arrival. We've crowded you off your aeroplane."

Marriot stared at him.

"Nonsense. We're all right."

Stupid of me, he thought ruefully: I'm a fool, I don't know how to talk to the young. But who does?

"Is it really impossible to take more people?"

"Absolutely. Didn't you understand what you were told last night?"

The tone of insulting pity made him smile.

"Yes, I understood. But I don't care for the division of people into V.I.P.'s and the others. I'm sure you don't. And the pilot of the aeroplane won't either."

"His opinion won't be asked," Marriot said. As if regret-

ting his brusqueness, he went on in a serious voice, "Not that he'll feel happy about it. He'll always feel he might have got away with it if he'd tried—if he'd taken the risk."

"Why shouldn't he take it?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

Breuner felt a grief that had very little to do with his pity for these three young whose chance of escape had been snatched from them.

"I am sorry."

"No call to be, we've had it."

Nothing he could say would be better than exasperating. He knew that, and, insensibly, he had turned back already to his own endless monologue.

"It's difficult to know what to say. I ran away, you know, once before—from another sort of tyranny. I'm not sure whether running away is worth it. Or even possible. The sort of freedom one hopes for would be possible if everyone is free—young men, peasants, navvies, children—all. It has never existed. Perhaps, unless we all believe in the same God, it's forever impossible. Who knows? I only know that it exists less now than at any moment in the past. Curious and a little disheartening, don't you think?"

He did not notice Marriot's silence, and started when the young man asked, abruptly,

"By the way, you're the Emil Breuner, aren't you? The physicist."

Half amused,

"Am I? I teach physics in Cambridge. I mean I used to—"
"I took my B.Sc. in London—King's College—only a
month before the war."

"In physics?" The interest he had felt in the young man started up. "What were you going to do?"

"You wouldn't approve."

"Really? How do you know?"

There was nothing impudent in the boy's mockery. Simply he did not feel the respect he might have been supposed to feel for the great Emil Breuner. Breuner preferred it that way.

"I know what you believe! You'd like me to skulk in my padded cell and get on with my job of discovering a way to put more powers in the hands of men who'll use them for their own futile ends. Greedy—self-interested—not fit to govern."

Ah, thought Breuner. The same quarrel he had had again and again—on his part without bitterness. He was never bitter; his passionate and impersonal curiosity did not leave him time for it. Often enough, though, his opponents were bitter enough to need to despise him. He said softly,

"You would like to govern?"

"No," answered Marriot. "Yes."

How decent he is, thought Breuner-how young, vivid, modest, intelligent . . .

"Not," the boy went on swiftly, "for the sake of governing. Good God, no. But—what was it you said?—for young men, peasants, navvies, children. I've been trained to be objective, to reason sanely from the facts. Tell me—what other sort of training is any use now? Would you give a child a candle and send it to play in a room full of explosives? Why think you can run atomic power on slogans and party jealousies and greed and prejudice? Only logical scientific minds—" He stopped. "You know it all," he said coolly.

Breuner did not answer at once. He knew what he thought, yes, but there was always the brief moment when he wondered: Am I right? what is the truth? Also, he did not want to offend the boy. It is so easy with the young to talk in a shorthand they don't follow, and which rouses their mocking resentment. His feeling for Marriot was almost affection. He had an impulse of mischief and gaiety, and gave way to it.

"Do you believe that scientists are so god-like? It's a delightful picture—the world run by calm reasonable tolerant chemists and biologists, who will never be corrupted by power because they think objectively. I am just afraid they might turn out to be human, after all."

Marriot's eyes sparkled with good-humoured malice.

"I bet you believe in original sin."

Smiling,

"Is that reactionary?" murmured Breuner. "I should have said it fitted the observed facts." Still smiling, he added, "You're a communist, aren't you?" The boy did not answer. "You needn't be afraid, I don't talk nonsense to people."

He saw the change in Marriot's face, to something eager and less guarded. The young man said rapidly,

"After all, it's the future if there is one. Maybe there isn't. But I believe there is, I believe you can wash away this bloody clot of injustice, I believe people will come to be amazed there was ever a time when an infant was born poor or rich. It's as simple as that!"

Breuner looked at him with the grave sympathy he felt.

"It won't be very simple for you, will it?"

There was nothing else he could have said. But the boy took himself back at once, into his defensive coolness friendly enough. "What do you mean?"

"You're on one side as a—as English, and on the other through your religion." He failed as usual to bring off a flat English r. "What a pity you didn't get away."

Marriot glanced at him with the caressing warmth he seemed able to call at will into his dark eyes.

"A wicked world. Have to do what you can," he said lightly. "Excuse me, I must go now."

He went off. Disturbed, without telling himself precisely why, Breuner looked after him. He had, he felt, said the wrong things . . . A comforting thought soothed him. After more than twenty years, he had not learned to trust easily the English trick of reconciling contradictions by sending them to play in different rooms. They have wisdom and no logic. If they have forgotten the trick, we are lost, he thought, smiling, all of us. But they don't forget it . . . He turned and saw three of them coming in from the airfield, the general and Lackland: they supported between them a bent groaning Clarke.

As they lowered him into a chair, Clarke said,

"One thing about this damned disease—it leaves off as suddenly as it came. To-morrow I may be skipping like a young ram." He grinned spitefully at Breuner. "Why can't you spend more time trying to cure our poor old bodies and less on tricks for killing us? You can't even get rid of my paunch, can you?"

Not sure whether he were serious, Breuner said kindly,

"If we walked on all fours, we shouldn't develop paunches."

"Many thanks," said Clarke, rolling his eyes.

George Heron sauntered in after them. Pale, the long hair

matted against his neck by the sweat pouring out of him, he looked sourly aware that it was ridiculous for him to be masquerading as a soldier. His voice was dry and peevish.

"Any news of our aeroplane?"

"Not a sign," Clarke answered. He was delighted to be able to disappoint Heron. "The professor here advises us to grow a couple of gills each and swim for it."

Lackland sent Heron a steady and expressionless glance.

"Do you intend to go, then?"

"Of course."

More out of mischief than from any wish to keep him, Lackland said,

"Very enterprising of you, I must say."

The general had not been able to check a movement of surprise. He rubbed his head, shook it vigorously from side to side like an impatient horse, and spoke with a curtness intended to silence Lackland.

"Have you finished the report you want me to take over?"

"No, sir, not quite."

"Well, get on with it, man, get on with it."

"I will, sir."

His nervous smile pulled Heron's mouth out of shape. In spite of his contempt for Lackland, he had been too deeply pricked to hold his tongue. With an offensive boredom, he said,

"I'm a writer, not a soldier."

"I know," Lackland said pleasantly. "I could use you just the same."

Heron did not answer at once. When he spoke, a sincerity forced itself through his bored condescension.

"You miss the point, don't you? There still are other values

than the heroic ones, and it may be worth trying to save them. You're like all Spartans, my dear fellow—very noble, and a little smug and self-righteous. You don't simply prefer soldiers, even bloody inefficient soldiers, to intellectuals—you want the poets to learn their drill because you understand drill and you don't understand poetry—or believe it's worth anything in comparison with your own highly-skilled job—which God knows must be done. It's an opinion. I shouldn't dream of quarreling with you about it. But can't you find a little politeness, I won't say charity, for us desperately unlucky—er—idea-bearers? We don't want, God help us, to go into exile."

The gleam of derision in Lackland's eye went no further. "My dear chap, run away and hatch your ideas," he said. "I quite see that you need a warm nest."

Holding himself together, Clarke laughed, squealed—"A-a-ah"—and blinked away tears of pain and spite. He glanced slyly at Thorburn, and was sobered by the profound sadness he detected in his friend's impassive face. He sees that his cock won't fight, he thought. This pleased him. He was sorry for his friend; he had an impulse to interfere before things got worse—and a contrary impulse to keep out: a peasant's instinct that no good comes of poking your nose into the quarrels of your masters. And, besides, he was enjoying it.

A flush spread over Heron's protrusive forehead.

"I doubt whether you see anything beyond the narrowest limits of your job," he said ironically. "It may never strike you that what you're trying to defend is more than this or any country. In any case, Europe is finished for at least a hundred years. Is anything, my God, more important than to save a few seeds of our civilisation and replant them in decent soil?" His sallow eyelids fell. "Do you read history? It's hardly the first time men like me have had to go into exile with only what they could carry in their minds." He glanced, with unfriendly civility, at Breuner. "I see you smile. But surely you agree?"

Breuner had been smiling in absence of mind. He was conscious, somewhere, of a quarrel going on round him, but he was not able to understand it: between him and these others stretched everything they had not lived through: not one of them knew yet what a man who has been your friend looks like when he has decided to denounce you to save himself . . . His politeness came forward to help him—but only to help him speak the truth.

"Perhaps America is too far. Or the wrong kind of soil for seeds from Europe. Who knows yet?"

Exasperated, Heron shrugged his shoulders.

"It can scarcely matter to you where you live," he said. "You've flourished here very nicely. I imagine you will there."

The general lifted his head, and stared down his great nose with extreme displeasure.

"Hold your tongue, boy." He frowned, moving clumsily in his chair. "And don't pretend it's anything but humiliating to leave the country because we're defeated . . . What's more, I'm not sure you can save ideas by bolting with them. Either they're alive and kicking and don't need you to save them, or they're beyond anyone's help. . . . Eh?"

No one answered him. Heron stood stiffly, an offended smile on his pale lips. With the mischievous glance of a schoolboy tormenting another under the master's very eyes, Lackland said,

"You wouldn't be any use here, my dear fellow. Certainly not to me. Don't worry, you'll be far better off transplanting yourself. I suppose you have friends over there. Chaps were bolting years ago with their precious seeds. Quite a nursery."

"Less murderous than yours," said Heron thinly. "What shocks me about your Robin Hood outfit is its uselessness. You'll kill any number of young men and young women, and for what? For a sordid-clumsy-adolescent romanticism. My God, what a bore adolescents are."

Lackland smiled at him with complacent mockery.

"Romanticism? Ah-when you're living your sensible virtuous life in America, think charitably about us-"

He was interrupted by Clarke. In his coarsest tones,

"What about me? All I ever asked was to be let end my days in a decent stuffy comfort—and what happens? I'm shot off to the ends of the earth without even the excuse of taking culture with me. Culture, God bless you, I have none. I respect it, y'know. Or do I? I talk the most ridiculous nonsense. Professor, you're the cleverest chap here—tell me. Am I more of a fool than a knave? Or is it t'other way—more knave than fool? What?"

"No, you're not a fool," Breuner said.

Clarke's grin became a preposterous leer.

"Well, God knows. I didn't think I was a coward—and here I am, running away like any skrimshanker of a staff goat."

"We all talk—I do too," murmured Breuner, "as if our civilisation is the only one. But the Russians have virtues of their own."

Lackland turned round on him with contempt.

"Nonsense!" He jerked his head up, so that for a moment the black patch over his left socket was startlingly distinct. He touched it lightly. "The chaps I was with when I got this—Serbs or what have you?—are fighting against us now. As I could have told you they would. Fine brutes, tigers for fighting. And that's all. The Reds won't be able to raise enough trained men—apart from local traitors—to administer half the countries they've laid open. That's the one thing you can be sure of."

With sudden weariness, agreeing with him heart and soul, and unable to like him, Thorburn growled,

"Yes—sensible enough. They'll have to leave some of us alone to lick ourselves and deal with our traitors. It'll be infernally unpleasant, and last God knows how long. And at the end of it—what will this island be like? But it's a chance. I'm damned if I see a better one."

His mouth full of bitterness and rage, Heron shouted,

"Yes, very fine—but what does your old skin matter, dead or alive? I shall be criticised for going. Naturally. A great many people will be only too delighted to think they've found someone meaner than themselves."

Without moving, Thorburn sent him a terrifyingly cold glance.

"You're not doing anything mean," he said.

"I don't need to be told that—" Heron stopped short, gasped, then walked jerkily from the room.

There was a silence. Clarke said mildly,

"We can all stand so much and no more."

Lackland's colourless eyebrow flew up.

"You can say that about any deserter."

"No," Clarke said, "he's no coward, he's an intelligent chap, a bit cleverer than he has bottom for, if you know what I mean—and he's had enough."

"He's had enough hatred. And he believes that Europe is finished," Breuner said under his breath.

Thorburn got up, balancing himself like a bear with a pole: he felt his anger with his godson drain out of him; it left behind it only a dry scum of grief.

"The boy's better than you give him credit for. You and I, my dear Will, are crude gross chaps, we know nothing about writers, but he's said to be one of the best we have. I believe it." He lifted his face, eyes closed against the powerful sunlight; a tremor ran across both vast sagging cheeks as though twitching off a fly. "If he can do his work only in exile . . . good men have gone into exile before now, eh?"

Lackland's eye gleamed.

"Certainly. And I've no doubt he'll wring the most eloquent and impressive literature out of our tears."

The general stood still. His temper, almost always under his control, was violent, and he had a merciless tongue—also well under control: its few victims remembered the experience to the end of their days, and he himself was ashamed when he had let it loose. He struggled with it now.

Breuner had moved nearer to Lackland and was looking at him with the liveliest curiosity.

"Do you know," he confessed, smiling, "I never noticed until now that you have only one eye."

Clarke cackled derisively. The absurdity of it caught Thorburn like an elbow in his ribs and jerked him into an inward spasm of laughter. "What it is to have a metaphysical mind," he stuttered. "I wish I had it."

"Here, help me up," Clarke said. He tried to stand up. "You, Lackland. I want to walk outside a bit. Do me good."

The two of them went out together. At once Breuner turned to Thorburn and said carefully,

"I must talk to you."

"Yes? What is it?"

"I must tell you frankly-I can't go in the aeroplane."

"Really?" Thorburn raised his eyebrows. "Why not?"

Breuner hesitated. He had to make certain of saying enough and not too much—not so much that he was suspected of being hysterical because he was a foreigner. This was one of the moments when he felt deeply how impossible it is, in a language not your own, to say the simplest things. For any complicated statement there is an equivalent phrase: for the primitive and simplest—nothing.

"I can't leave my wife here," he said. "She is alone."

"Where is she?"

"I think in Cambridge. We live there. I left her at home when I was sent to the north to work."

"H'm." The general stared at him with a distant kindliness. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid you must go, you know."

Breuner turned his head. The Herons' little boy had come into the room from the airfield: he was balancing something on his hand, a rudimentary aeroplane—Hutton had made it for him, no doubt. Seeming not to notice that there were people in the room, he sat down in an armchair. He was absorbed, sunk, in his toy. Breuner was struck by his quietness: very old people sit with the same quietness, he thought; so do animals—waiting for something, in the immense space

round them, to begin. How much of their time children spend in waiting, and how defenceless they are, humbly and patiently open to anything we choose to do to them . . . He turned back to Thorburn.

"No, I can't go," he said quietly. "It's impossible." Thorburn frowned.

"I don't think you understand the position. We were sent out of our way, to pick you up—but for you, we should have been away now, y'know. Why? Because whatever it may be you're doing, or you know about, is monstrously important to us. It's obviously essential to get you away."

Breuner had the sense that he was pressing against a weight, like a man buried under a fall of earth, pushing against it with an effort that dragged his lungs out of place.

"Yes, yes, I know," he said in an inaudible voice. "I thought, at first, that I couldn't refuse, I ought to go. But waiting here I've had time to think about it—" This is my only country, he thought, with pain. I look at it from the opposite side, yet I see it more clearly than its own born do. I don't need it, nor any country, but it let me live here, and I ought to be willing to die for it—if that were all, dying would be extremely easy and natural, but . . . She needs me, he thought sharply. No—I need her . . . He looked at the general without seeing him. "There is something else. We have to choose—each of us must choose: which is his moment? To leave the country, to go? To stay here with the colonel?" He hesitated. "Perhaps even to stay in order to work—with them . . . Who knows? . . . It is the only problem—to recognise one's own moment. Not to miss it."

"Well?" Hands folded on his stomach, Thorburn was watching him.

You understand me, Breuner thought. He said softly, "It may be right for me to go. And I can't."

Thorburn did not answer at once. In the silence, the light sound made when the child dropped his toy was startling. They looked at him. He picked the thing up. One of the wings had fallen off. With an intense concentration, frowning, he worked on it, turning it this way and that in his small fingers.

"You realise, of course, that as a—what do they call it? an intellectual enemy, a beast, a degenerate social lackey, you'll be strung up out of hand."

Breuner's smile played on his dark face.

"So many young men have found out easily how to die. I'm sure I shall manage it all right."

"Yes, of course," said Thorburn. "I'm sorry. That was a very stupid thing to say. . . . But—damn it, man, have you any right to think of yourself—and your personal affections?"

"No. I agree—no." He saw his wife for a moment, distinctly. "No right at all." She was wearing one of the clumsy cheap overalls she wore when she cleaned the house and cooked. Not that she was ever better than decently clothed. She had no notion of making herself attractive: she brushed back her grey hair and scrubbed her pale strong face with soap. It was years since the lively slender girl he married had disappeared in a shapeless body; now and then she looked up at him from the depth of small eyes, unclouded by a single lie. Her one vanity was to say in talking, "we English." She spoke English atrociously; her husband had only to come into the room where she was for every sound, colour, scent, of his childhood to close round him at once—like her, truth-

ful, loyal, modest . . . He looked at Thorburn again, and repeated,

"No, I think no right. But this is—you are asking me for too much. We have always been together, like an eye and an eyelid. No one could do it." He hesitated for a long time, and said, "If I could have seen her and explained it to her."

Before trying to answer him, Thorburn lumbered across the room and back again, knocking into a table. He rubbed his hair. His tunic was open, and the waistband of his trousers slipping down across his wide flabby stomach: he dragged at it impatiently.

"D'you think you're the only one? What about the commanders of destroyers and the rest, forced to leave wives and families in this country—probably never know what happened to them—and take their ships across the other side of the world? Eh? My dear fellow, you might be the captain of a cargo steamer getting his orders over the wireless to turn back. Do you suppose they like it—putting the ship about, turning their backs—leaving their women to live in this nightmare? It's inhuman. . . . A choice between their feelings as husbands and the rest of it, and their—call it solidarity, human decency—anything you like . . ."

"Yes," Breuner said. "That is true. . . . I can't go."

The child put down the broken pieces of the aeroplane. He covered his face with his hands and began crying without a sound. Tears sprang between his fingers and fell on his bare knees. He sat still, leaning forward a little.

"One can't always avoid behaving badly," said Thorburn. "Something or other happens and you're faced with the ugly job of being guilty." He lowered his untidy head. "God damn it," he said drily, "it's not only women we're deserting,

we're deserting this country—it's no crueller but it's unforgivable."

"No, I can't go," Breuner said again, quietly unmoved. He smiled and added, "We are not cut off from our past. It tells us: Do this. But afterwards, when it's done, we have to go on living with what we did."

He noticed the child, and went over to him quickly.

"What is it, Nick? What has gone wrong?"

Without a word, the child held out to him the smashed aeroplane. Turning it over in his brown hand, Breuner asked Thorburn,

"How old is he?"

"Five. Yes, he's five," Thorburn said after a moment.

"For a young child he cries too quietly," said Breuner. "It's rather wrong, I think." He laid the pieces carefully back in the child's hand. "There's nothing to worry about. Your friend Hutton will mend it. Don't worry."

Nick glanced at him with a child's incurable despair.

"Hutton can't," he said, "he's busy."

"Well," Breuner said smiling, "you must do something yourself. Let me see—can you draw? Of course you draw." He unclipped his fountain-pen from his breast-pocket and tore a page from his notebook. "Here—make a picture."

Obediently, the child got up and went over to the table. He spread the page there, smoothed it carefully with his fist, and set to work, languidly at first, then, screwing up his eyes a little, with smiling energy. Kent came into the room.

"May I speak to you, sir?" he said to the general.

"Shall I go?" Breuner asked.

Kent glanced at him with indifference.

"No, do stay."

There was a moment's silence. Thorburn sat down. The young man, he noticed, was very tense; his cheek twitched and he held himself stiffly, his fair head thrust forward. His hands were shaking.

"Well?" he said brusquely, meaning to encourage the boy. In an expressionless voice, Kent said,

"I want to speak to you, sir, about Miss Hugh-Brown. We're married and she's going to have a child. She ought to get away."

Thorburn jerked himself forward in the chair, then leaned back, disconcerted, vexed because he had shown it tactlessly.

"Good God, what possessed you," he muttered. "What did you say? . . . No, damn it, don't answer, it's not my business. Why the devil didn't you send her away when you had the chance? Eh?"

"She didn't want to go," Kent said with an effort. He added, "The past few weeks we've been so infernally busy evacuating the Garra House people and their equipment, I didn't worry about anything else. And I didn't realise how bad things were—or what we were up against. I've been a fool, I know."

He was not, the general saw, making excuses. With a savage feeling of disgrace, he was cursing his own ignorance and his bewilderment. It was the bewilderment, and the guilt and anxiety, of millions at this moment, living, minute by sick minute, a nightmare.

"You want to make certain she gets away in the aeroplane," he said as gently as he could. The young man did not answer. "Well? Out with it, boy—what is it?" "Ah," Breuner murmured, "she won't go unless you go with her. Isn't that what she says?"

Kent looked at him.

"Yes."

"What the devil—" began Thorburn drily. He hesitated. "I'm sorry about this, damned sorry. We must do something. It won't do. It's intolerable, in fact." As if possessed of an animal energy of its own, his hand was scrabbling among the roots of his hair. It calmed him, and he repeated quietly, "No, it won't do."

Without knowing it, Kent glared at him.

"It isn't likely there'll be room for either of us," he said. "Even if there were I have no right to go."

He had not asked a question. None the less, the question lay there abruptly between them, and the general felt an extreme disturbance and uncertainty. He saw the shapeless crowd on the pavement of the town, faces turned up watching the aeroplanes pass high above them into freedom, and clearer than he knew he had seen it, the face of the woman, with its infinite resignation, suffering, love, and, between the eyelids closing against the light, hope. With the sense that nothing he could say was any good, he muttered,

"If possible, you should go. Let's see. If Major Heron decides to stay behind, there'll be that much more room. It's only one place, but you and the pilot may decide it's not impossible to push two people into it." To his stupefaction, he felt a quiver of laughter in his stomach. "The brigadier and I are both old men, tottering on the edge of the grave. One of us may easily drop into it before the aeroplane gets here—what?"

Kent was, he saw, too surprised to answer. He was conscious, too, of Breuner's dark, very bright eyes scrutinising him.

"That isn't the advice you gave your godson."

"Ah, you see, one's never too old to learn," he answered, with a touch of mockery. "In fact, he was right about my old skin." He turned sharply to Kent. "Go away and have another child—as many as you like. My dear boy, if there are no more children who speak English, there'll be no England. And whatever the fools think, it'll be a damned poor world without us. As for fighting—you'll fight from over there." The young man still did not say anything, and he said impatiently, "That's what you expected to do, isn't it?"

Kent looked at him fixedly.

"Yes, sir."

"The job's waiting for you."

"I know it is."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. . . . I rather thought—seeing I've been offered the chance to stay here and get on with it—that that was what I ought to do."

The general felt something between pity and irritation. You can't help them, he thought; they live to contradict.

"Have you your parents?" Breuner was asking.

"I have," Kent said in a forbidding voice.

"Well-compared with a wife, they don't matter."

"I know that."

The devil you do, Thorburn said to himself. Liking, a warm pity, got the better of his moment of irritation.

"In the circumstances-that is, Colonel Lackland and his

Home Army—it's entirely a matter for yourself whether you go or stay." You'll be killed soon enough either way, he thought. "As this fellow here says"—he jerked his head at Breuner—"the thing is to recognise your moment . . . you'll be fully as useful over there as here."

Kent moved his hands uncertainly—he looked haggard and very young.

"I know I have to make up my own mind," he said indistinctly. "It seems indecent to worry too much about, well, happiness."

"No," Breuner said, with a rage unlike himself. "It's not indecent. You must go if you can. It's better."

Kent turned to go away-and abruptly turned back.

"Why were we defeated?" he asked fiercely.

The general shrugged his shoulders with a pretence of calm, but his small yellowish eyes gleamed.

"Why? For the simple reason that we went to war. In 1945 there was one hope for us and for Europe—a long peace, fifty, a hundred years of peace: we needed at least that to recover from our loss of blood—so many dead, so many crimes committed in the name of obscene ideas. And—after the war—in the name of justice and the rest of it." He struck the arm of his chair with his big fleshy hand. "I dislike Germans, I've always disliked them, servile people, with disgusting habits—torture and the rest of it . . . but I've no respect for the way any of us behaved after the last war. It was natural, and it was stupid, idiotic, fatal. As for this war—and the folly of expecting help from countries split open from top to bottom, like France—and our own weakness, not enough men, no room, pinned down on an island the size

when it comes to atomic war of a beetle under a navvy's foot . . ." His face was distorted. "The destruction that wasteth at noonday, what? Do you read the Bible?"

Kent smiled quickly. "No, sir."

"You should, you should. More up-to-date than you think."

"I will if I can find one," Kent said politely. He had no intention of doing it.

Breuner leaned against a table, his head sunk. The question Kent threw at them-Why were we defeated?-had had the effect on him of a sudden mist blowing up when you are on an unfamiliar road. He groped in it. A country dies when its time comes—when its body ceases to renew itself: when the flesh is no longer warm, generous, able to love. In its youth and maturity, it produces great literature, it has a great many children. Perhaps a great many of these die, but more are born, out of the energy, the-the eloquence, and the loins of the future. The writers, the architects, the men and women, are all of them generous or involuntary creators. Later on, with age, they become commentators, clever, terribly efficient—as we say, functional—but this insistence on function is a sign of age. They talk a great deal, but the flesh is beginning to be mean and cold. And it is the body which loves and has children. . . . In the end, at the last moment, with everything said, and no more life asking to be put into words, there will be silence. . . . He came back from his darkness to the shabby room, the heat, the dazzling light outside between sea and sky: in the salt air there was a scent of gorse and dry rocks. He had no idea that he had been silent for several minutes: out of politeness, he tried to answer the last thing he had heard.

"Very likely the world—or our world—has grown too complicated. It could only break."

Kent looked at him with a defensive mockery.

"So it's the end of us, is it?"

Throwing his head back, Thorburn said with suppressed passion,

"No. By God, it's not. The English fight better than anyone in the world. Give us a faith"—he laughed angrily—"give us something less absurd as a religion than insurance and wireless sets, and we shall rise from the dead. By God, we shall."

"Wars never kill everyone," Breuner said. "There is always one man or one child left, to begin again." To begin again what? he thought. The dialogue between finite and infinite, between men and God. He looked at Kent. "It could be your child."

"Born in America?" said Kent.

"And to think," muttered Thorburn, "that America is now the bulwark, the hope, the only, yes, future, of our"—he hesitated—"of all our deeds and words since we began here." It offended him beyond bearing. Not that he had not thought about it often enough, in the uneasy years since 1945, as being possible, even likely. But to think a thing, and then to know it as the body knows a knife entering it—why, the difference is mortal.

Kent laughed.

"It never struck me until yesterday that I was running away," he said with a light bitterness.

"You're not only running away, you're running to something," Breuner said quickly. "What is America? A country

of immigrants. A test everyone who goes there must pass or fail in. . . . You would be foolish to expect to be safe there. Or anywhere. If you realise that nowadays there is no place to be safe in . . . I should say, no home . . . if you live knowing it, you will be free—you may even be very happy."

Just at this moment, Nicholas Heron dropped the pen he had been jerking with mad energy over the paper, and came across the room to them. He thrust the page into Breuner's hand.

"Read it, please."

Breuner peered at it. The figure 1 stood alone at the top of the page: below it, close together, were lines of marks very like written words.

"What are all these marks?" he asked.

Nick burst out laughing. As soon as he began to talk, his face lost the air of sadness it had in repose—which so many young children have—and became mischievous and lively.

"Writing, of course—can't you see?" He snatched the paper away from Breuner. "I'll read it to you, shall I? All of you had better listen. It's the first chapter of a book I've written. . . . Once an aeroplane landed in a field and there were wild bulls. The ambassador said—"

"The ambassador?" Thorburn interrupted slyly.

"He was in the aeroplane." Nick frowned at the interruption. "So they killed the bulls, and roasted them—"

"Who killed them?"

Impatiently,

"Who do you think? The ambassador, and the other people—and what they couldn't eat themselves they gave to the farmer's wife." He stopped, and burst out laughing again. "That's all I've written."

"I don't think you need anything more," said Breuner. "I should think it's finished."

"It's for you," said Nick. "Here you are. . . . I know how to write, don't I?"

But before Breuner could answer, the young soldier, Hutton, appeared in the doorway: he was afraid to come any further, and stood there without speaking. The child saw him, and forgetting his "book," cried out, "Oh, there you are, my darling," in a voice of such anxious and joyful love that the three men looked at him with amazement. Is there such love?

Running to the door, he flung himself at Hutton, and they went away together. Kent mumbled an excuse and took himself off: outside the door he almost knocked into Clarke—returning alone, sweating and out of breath. He looked sourly after Kent and remarked,

"No need to be sorry for the young; they're young." "Sit down," Thorburn said to him.

The door into the corridor opened. Smith came in. Hesitated. Looking at him, the general thought that he had known him all his life and seen him hundreds of times—the same man; short, rather in the legs than the body, with broad shoulders and thin muscular arms; small eyes of no definite colour; at the back of them usually an ironic gleam, half friendly, half derisive and guarded; he was shrewd, mistrustful, competent, knew your place as well as he knew his, and, if a chance took you back of his shrewdness, surprising you by his charity.

"Excuse me, sir, I wanted to speak to the colonel."

"What is it you want?" asked Thorburn. "You can speak to me about it."

"It's about this Home Army," Smith said quietly and slowly. "I thought I should let him know I'm not joining. I have a wife and children and I'm off home. That's all."

"But weren't you going with the aeroplane?"

"No, sir. They thought I was, because of I said I'd wait back for Flying-Officer Henderson—I'm his fitter—but I wasn't. Not me."

Genially inquisitive, Thorburn asked him,

"What are you going to do with yourself?"

"Oh, I can always have a job."

"What were you-in civil life?"

"Tool-setter, sir."

"A very skilled job," Breuner said in his friendly voice.

"It is."

"Keep whippets?" Clarke asked.

"Yes, sir."

"A good Labour man, too, I'll be bound. You needn't answer, it's written all over you."

Only a man from his own part of the country would have known, from Smith's face, that he resented these questions. He said quietly,

"I wasn't going to answer, sir."

Thorburn showed all his strong discoloured teeth in a smile.

"I've always wanted to ask one of you chaps what you thought you were winning. . . . If you had to strike—a fatuous thing to do, in a country as poor and dependent as ours—but if you had to, I say—why hadn't you the guts, or

the wit, to strike for something worth having? For a share of authority—and not, like the docile silly devils you must be, for a few miserable shillings. Eh?"

Snapping his fingers, Clarke bawled,

"We saw them, we saw them, Lying on their backs at St. Omer, We saw them, lying on their—

Sorry, old boy, sorry. Out of my turn."

A jeering ironic gleam crossed Smith's face.

"Maybe you were never put to it for a few miserable shillings—" he began.

Thorburn cut him roughly short.

"Nonsense, damned nonsense. You asked for shillings because you hadn't the courage or sense to ask for anything more. You bent your backs for a lot of clever ambitious monkeys to climb on and talk down to you about freedom and justice and the rest of it while you went on living like the poor creatures you always were. Freedom! Equality! Revolution! Good God, you don't know what the words mean. Your monkeys told you you'd had a revolution and you took their word for it: they did themselves damned well out of it and you went on strike for another half-crown. Well—it takes all sorts of fools to prepare a defeat, and all sorts of cowards."

Smith was silent. His eyes lay like stones in their bruised sockets. Thorburn's quick overbearing voice—the words cutting down on him so fast that he missed a few of them—angered him more than the insult.

"Nay, if you weren't in such a flawter to clear off," he

said, "you'd find out if there are more cowards among our lot than yours."

"I don't think it is any use to blame each other," said Breuner quietly.

Thorburn got heavily up. Taking no notice of Breuner, he said.

"And do you think you'll get freedom and justice from the savages coming in?"

"We can stand poverty better nor your class; we'll maybe survive."

"Survivors," Thorburn said bitterly. "Is that all?" He turned his back.

As, awkwardly, even, in spite of his anger, disconcerted, Smith was going, Breuner stepped in front of him.

"I hope," he said, "that you will get home all right and be allowed to live there."

Smith turned on him a stolid glance.

"Why not? I s'll be nobody. Who's going to be able to tell me from scores of Smiths?" He stopped, moved his head as if loosening it in a collar—and added, almost under his breath, "And don't make any mistake—I shan't forget to see what I see and think what I think, and I s'll teach th'lad the same. If he's mine and his mother's he won't forget it, neither."

"For once it is better to be poor?"

"I won't say it's not."

"Are you leaving now?" Breuner asked.

"Nay, how can I leave before I've seen you lot out?" Breuner smiled.

"Oh, well, we shall see each other again," he murmured.

Not knowing what to do with Breuner's politeness, suspicious of it, Smith turned and went off.

Clarke spoke with the sly not very amiable contempt of the countryman for the factory-worker.

"I know his sort. They learn everything in factories but what's what. Time was he used to have a fine life playing in David Smith and Goliath—full houses, where's me sling? whang! over goes the big capitalist bully, good old David, hip hip hurrah, and off we go for a quiet one with Goliath before the pub closes. Goliath gets himself nationalised, what? slings are out of order, nowt for little David to do but wish himself the compliments of the season and ask Goliath to spare a copper."

"I had no business to blame him," Thorburn said, "he's less to blame than anyone. Certainly less than his so-called betters—men without religion or charity. They made his life a mean little affair—hardly worth losing."

"He is rather lucky," Breuner said.

Thorburn turned on him a cold and overbearing glance. "What did you say?"

"He is lucky," Breuner repeated quietly, "he is going to his wife."

I DOW GENTLE, HOW FRIENDLY, is a summer night in the north. After the heat of the day it was cool, yet not cold, and, half an hour off midnight, neither light nor dark. Looking into it from the narrow window of their bedroom, Elizabeth Heron knew that nothing, none of the warm, vivid, incontestably lovely places she knew they could find to live in—over there—would blunt the pain of losing just this, the kindness of the north.

She turned away from it, and bent over the child's bed. At last he was asleep. She crept out. Downstairs, when she pushed open the door of the common room, she found only her husband. In the moment when she came in he was working the heel of his boot through an illustrated paper lying open on the floor. It disturbed her—but she glanced smilingly at the obliterated page.

"Who are you killing? . . . Oh, poor man, it's not his fault. He couldn't work a miracle, and what else could have saved us?"

Very slightly ashamed, Heron said vehemently,

"No, it's myself I'm cursing. Why didn't we leave five, ten years ago? Why wait until the last minute, and have to bolt like rats? I was a fool."

"We talked about it often enough. Perhaps it was my fault we didn't."

"No," he answered, "it was mine. The truth is I was afraid."

"You? What nonsense. . . . If I'd encouraged you, we should have gone. I hated to leave our house—we were going to live in it for ever. Now it's a heap of ashes, and your books with it. You'll never forgive me!"

He looked at her.

"If I came in and told you I'd murdered someone, you'd say it was your fault."

"It might well be," she said, smiling. "I might have poisoned your brain with my coffee. Why is it I can't make good coffee?"

Half leaning on her, his arms round her shoulders, he said, "You're the only person I love. Except myself, of course," he added bitterly.

"Yes," she said, "I think you love me."

"I love you, I depend on you, I trust you. If it weren't for you, I couldn't face America. I should have stayed here—until finally I had to swallow the poison old Lambert gave us for the worst."

She was careful not to let him see that she was afraid.

"I don't think I should ever be sure I'd reached the worst. I always want to go as far as the next corner."

"The worst would have been to be arrested . . . I shall

throw Lambert's little present out of the aeroplane when we leave—where did the fellow say?—Labrador."

"Throw it away now."

"Certainly not."

"Then give it me to keep. My—my curiosity will see to it that we don't swallow it too soon."

Turning from her, he made an impatient gesture, then said in a voice he tried to make gentle,

"We must decide where we can live. New York is impossible. Too many people, too violent and restless-I should have a duodenal ulcer in a week. What would you feel about some rather isolated part of California? The sea there would remind us of Antibes, there are hills, pine forests, cypresses. There'll be sand. In fact, very like the Mediterranean. And we can live cheaply-so that I needn't ruin myself by writing quickly. I must have time, and I must have quiet. Time to work myself out of the despair we've been living in. I have things to say. But before I can say them I shall have to learnit will be painful enough-to detach myself from Europe -and the agony and despair of Europe." He contorted his face. "You don't write properly about a deathbed when you can still smell it. Over there they don't know what it is to be a European. They don't want to know. After all, why should they? Why should the living want a corpse dragged into their rooms? Time enough to worry about dying when it happens . . . and aren't they right? What a monstrous difference it makes now whether you've been born on this side of the Atlantic or that. Here we're prisoners, there we shall be exiles. Heaven knows how long it will take me to learn to breathe without anguish. I may be too old. God knows I feel an old man. No one can live in a dying civilisation as if it were a living one. It's impossible. Everything I've written so far has been in spite of our rottenness, and it has exhausted me. If I'd been born in an age of faith, I'd have had all the force of the age with me, I might have been a great writer. Why didn't I leave Europe sooner . . . free myself . . ." He had been walking feverishly a few steps forward and back: now he turned on her. "Am I too old to begin living? Can I, when I get over there, can I become disinterested—detached—in the way a priest is—not like a man drowning on a raft and trying to live his last minutes calmly? That's no use, that's not life. Elizabeth . . ."

His wife looked at him with a tranquil face.

"Why not?"

"Think. . . . To get away from the fear, the cruelties, the hatred—all the poisons we breathe here. They were choking me . . . even before this . . ."

There were times when her voice was another and less severe form of laughter. As now—

"But do you believe there are no hatreds over there?"

"Oh, of course, there are-but they needn't touch us."

"You mean, because we shall be safe?"

Vexed, he said curtly,

"If you like."

She was silent. Something in her face—she was looking down—puzzled him. He was just going to ask her if she felt anxious when she looked up at him, and said,

"George, are you positive we can't stay in this country?" He was startled—shocked.

"What do you mean?"

"No, I haven't gone mad," she said quickly, "or lost my

nerve about going. Simply—we've had nine years, nearly ten. Oughtn't we to be satisfied?"

"I don't understand you."

She smiled at him, with an air of confident love.

"I've been thinking about it the whole evening. Ten years. And we've been gloriously happy. Better than that, we've been content. How do you know that, over there, we shan't forget to be content, and be like most people—disappointed, anxious, rather greedy?"

He looked at her with cold anger.

"What is this, Elizabeth?"

"Partly those children. Only partly. The rest is—you and me."

"What children?"

"That boy, Andrew Kent-and the girl. They've just married."

"I don't want to be unkind," he said, exasperated. "But I don't see what it has to do with us."

His wife hesitated.

"She's started a child."

"And haven't we a child? Really, Elizabeth!"

She was trembling. It was not likely he would notice it—but she turned away and walked airily to one of the leather couches, and arranged herself on it, crossing her legs and smoothing her skirt into place.

"I thought—I would ask the girl—Cordelia—to take him with her and give him to your friends the Hoyts in New England. They're rich, kind, they'll look after him, and bring him up as if he were their own."

His exasperation had become fear.

"Impossible," he said. "You must be mad."

"To think of staying here?"

"No. To think of handing our son over to strangers."

"Friends . . . kind, utterly reliable friends."

She was speaking so unemotionally, almost lightly, that again he wondered: Is she out of her mind? If she isn't . . . His head throbbed with anger: he said coldly,

"Are you really prepared not to see your child again? Not even to know whether he's alive . . . simply to abandon him?"

Without answering, she closed her eyes, lifting her head, so that the tear which forced itself under each eyelid did not run down. Rigid, her face was purely her grief. She shuddered, and said,

"No-don't."

Afraid to touch her, Heron said,

"You're tired to death. If you weren't—and if you weren't distracted, you wouldn't have had such an idea. Fantastic."

Opening her eyes, she looked at him attentively.

"Is it so fantastic?"

"Surely you can see it is." His resentment started up again. He was too worn-out, too anxious, to have to deal with this. "Why should we sacrifice ourselves? What use would it be?"

"No use, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Saving ourselves, at the expense," she said in a low voice, "of two younger people. Until we came along it was their chance. We're pushing them out of the aeroplane to get in ourselves. George, think—it's intolerable."

"What do you suggest we should do?" he said drily. "Add ourselves to the million-odd people dying in the south of England? Stay here?"

She had recovered her calm.

"We could make our way to Harry's house in Stockbridge. Everyone knows us there, the whole village. Two people, working in it, can live off the garden—or nearly. It would be a hard life, but it's easy to be poor where you're known. We might even be safe. You know what Colonel Lackland says—they can't invade the whole country at once—"

"That fool-" he began.

She interrupted him.

"In any case," she smiled, "it's better to die in one's own place. There's a verse in Isaiah, I've been remembering it, says: In returning and rest shall ye be saved. . . . I was never certain what it meant, but it means—surely?—when life has become too great a strain—when everything you can still drive yourself to do would be false, a lie—then the one truthful thing left to do is to go back where you started from, and live there simply. For some people it's right to go—of course. Others . . . for us—danger—hunger—the defeat—may be our life itself . . ."

He made the effort to talk to her in sensible judicial tones.

"My dear girl, you're asking me to do something I could do easily if I were anything but—as I am—a writer. Nothing but a writer. What use should I be in a village? I can't dig, I can't even hold a spade. It's too late for me to turn myself into a peasant. I much prefer exile."

"You needn't be a labourer," she said, laughing at him. "I'll do all that. You can go on writing."

He looked at her with the rage he felt.

"Don't be foolish. Or at any rate don't tell lies to yourself. You know quite well. It would be impossible—even if I were left alive—to write. How do you imagine I can write in a country occupied by savages—barbarians? It's ridiculously impossible. I can only write in freedom. I might as well cut my throat now. For me, it simply isn't a choice, it's either exile or the end of everything. Even before I'm killed, it's the end."

Lifting her hands,

"What is this freedom you're going to find over there?"

"Nothing easy," he said. "The sort of freedom, I suppose, a monk has in his cell."

"But a monk without a religion," she said swiftly, "without faith."

"You're mad," he shouted, "and driving me mad." Hardly knowing what he was doing, he began to walk about the room. "You have no right to spring this mad scheme on me now, at the last minute."

She stood up quickly.

"My love—my dear dear love—it's only the last minute of one life. We can begin another at once."

"Impossible," he groaned, "you're impossible."

"If I were alone, I might be afraid," she said, nearly inaudibly. "But not with you."

"You can't have thought I should agree. Or are you really mad?"

She was looking at him with what he thought a mocking tenderness.

"But is it madness? Are you sure it wasn't more insane to think—at our age—of putting down roots in another country—an incredibly different country—which isn't even young . . . sophisticated without ever having been simple? Aren't we mad to believe we could do it? It will be easy for Nick—he's a child, he'll grow up there, he'll become an American,

his few memories of this country will grow into memories of his childhood over there—until he won't know, when he looks at something far back in his mind, a field, or a shell, whether it was that field"—she turned her head to the light darkness of the airfield—"or the one he'll play in in New England. But we—we should be torn in two, always, always homeless, always hearing some other voice under the voices round us. No, no—let's stay here—as long as we live."

Heron felt empty of everything except his weariness—and of something else—what was it?—a seed of panic.

"I can't," he said.

She ran to him.

"My darling . . ."

"Perhaps I ought to stay," he said with an effort. "I don't know. All I know is that I can't. I can't."

She laid her arms round him.

"Very well-we'll go."

"I must get away," he said. "For every reason. To stay here—no, it's impossible, I couldn't face it."

His forehead, under her fingers, was coldly damp. So this—this naked anxiety to be safe—had lain at the bottom of everything else in his mind. He won't, she thought quietly, be able to live with it—nor with his fear nor his feeling of guilt . . . He would turn from them at any cost . . . And from me, unless I can help him now.

"You mean—we can't send Nick away without us," she said, very slowly.

He shook with relief.

"How could we? It would be wicked. Insane. An insane wish to hurt ourselves."

"Yes," she murmured, "yes."

"And we can't let him stay here—to die of hunger or typhus. They say it's begun already in London. Or taken away from us and worked to death somewhere, like a little animal." His mouth twitched. "Your emotions run away with you. They always did."

"I know."

"How angrily you would have blamed me if I'd let you act on a sentimental impulse. Wouldn't you?"

She nodded.

"You would have had every right. My dear child—we must be sensible, we must—you've said so often enough these last few days—we must keep calm and very quiet. America won't be easy, for you or me. I know that. It will need a great deal of courage. But you have courage enough."

She moved slightly away from him.

"I have very little," she smiled. "Strangers, especially the people we shall meet—rich, successful, imposing—frighten me horribly. You must be imposing for both of us."

"What nonsense," he said indulgently; he reached out and stroked her arm. "You'll meet only kindness, the greatest kindness."

"It will be for your wife," she mocked.

An expression half amused, half gratified crossed his face. She felt horror at the completeness of her success.

"Silly girl," he said fondly, "you know I love you. Don't you?"

"I . . . Oh, what am I doing?" she cried.

"Recovering from a fit of nerves. Was it nerves? or were you being jealous? Little idiot. . . . What was it you said about American women? You needn't be afraid, I shan't make a fool of myself again. I promise."

She suffered from his fatuity more than she would have done if she had not loved him.

"Don't promise anything, my dear. Except to take no notice when I have a fit of nerves."

"You're satisfied now? You know I'm right about it, don't you?"

She moved her head.

"Yes. Of course."

"And you approve of me?"

"My darling, yes."

He looked at her with the smile that lifted one corner only of his mouth. When they first married, it had amused her: she caught herself wondering now if he had always been too self-regarding to smile frankly.

"I need approval. I don't, you know, always approve of myself."

"If you did, you would be a monster-"

Caressing her, tired out, he said,

"Everything's all right. We'll live simply, I'll work very hard. We'll begin again and it will be like the first year—you'll be happy."

"It's the only thing I do well," she said: "happiness . . ."
Between his exhaustion and a sudden pity for her, he felt
that he could very easily cry.

"What should I do without you, my dear Elizabeth?"

"Marry a well-brought-up young woman with rich parents. . . . Listen." She lifted her head. "Nicholas is running about the room. Don't you hear him? He's scarcely slept at all."

"I'll go up and read to him," Heron said.

He hurried off. She was following him: a light sound

caught her ear; turning her head she saw Cordelia standing in the doorway, against the night. For a long minute, they looked at each other in silence. She took a swift step towards the girl.

"Forgive me," she said.

Cordelia did not answer. She looked steadily at Elizabeth, with an indifference the older woman took for contempt or an implacable dislike. Forcing herself to smile a little, she went quickly out of the room.

Alone, Cordelia moved slowly, very slowly, to an armchair near Kent's desk and sat down. With an absent gesture, she pushed back her hair and rubbed her eyes. Following her in, Kent thought: She ought to be asleep. Poor child . . . Marriot was with him; he came in leaving the door wide open on the airfield.

"A minute or two without our dear guests," he said, grinning.

Cordelia sat up; she yawned, stretching her thin arms.

"Why don't they go to bed? It's after midnight."

"Afraid they'll miss the trip."

Kent seated himself on the edge of the desk.

"I can't stand that fellow Heron," he said irritably. "I'm certain he's bogus, and if he's rude to me again I shall hit him."

Cordelia looked at him with a smile.

"I wouldn't."

You should be in bed, my love, you should be in bed, Kent thought, and said curtly,

"No, you wouldn't, but I would."

Sprawling in his chair, his useless arm laid across his knee, Marriot said, "God, how different this room is without them."

"They think it's theirs," Cordelia said.

"The type I should like to hit is Lackland," he went on, with energy. "I loathe his sort of clever professional soldier, far far more than I hate a simple brute—who is probably a brute because he hates himself worse than he hates his victims. Lackland only kills for good reasons, he's a disciplinarian, he dislikes men who don't know their place in the ranks, they offend him. He wrote something once—did you know?—every boy from the age of five to be taught to kill—defend himself, was what he said—the girls trained for motherhood—"

Kent interrupted.

"I don't mind him," he said easily. "In fact, I rather like him."

Marriot's eyes sparkled with derision and fury.

"Because you don't think, because you weren't born in the ranks, you haven't had to fight for your chance to live and you haven't a son of five who is going to be brought up without a rebellious idea in his head—"

"Davy."

Cordelia's voice checked him. It was full of grief and excitement, and barely audible. He looked at her in surprise, was going to speak, but held his tongue. Something—what?—had happened to her. With a clash of impatience and liking he thought that she was after all a young woman—perhaps a frightened young woman.

"What's the matter, Browny?"

"You can help me." She looked at him directly. He was reminded of a handsome little dog he had once had, which used to watch him with just this intelligence, honesty, trust. "If Jock will risk it, I'll go with him. Because—you might as well know—I'm having a child—or did you know?" She broke off, still calmly watching him.

I should have guessed it, he thought. He avoided looking at Kent, partly because she would notice it and think he was asking for help. Gently, he tried to comfort her.

"Of course you must go."

"I've been telling her that," Kent said, too harshly.

The girl did not look at him. Her mind was fastened on its purpose; she would not risk being weakened and turned from it by their love.

"You'll think it mad to have a child now," she said gravely to Marriot. "Perhaps it is. He could be unhappy—or die like all the others who are dying . . . I felt it would be cowardly not to. One oughtn't to give up." Her lips quivered briefly in a smile. "You see why I want to go away—but I want Andrew to come with me."

Kent interrupted her, with bitterness.

"Why talk about it, Cordelia? You know it's impossible."

Before she could answer—(She'll very likely say the wrong thing, he thought, pitying her)—Marriot said,

"Let's think this out. There's possibly one place. But, if the famous writer grabs it—mind you, I think he will—that means . . . you can see for yourself what it means. Jock might take one extra body. You. But two bodies . . . you know the answer to that one, Browny."

She closed her eyes for a moment.

"Yes."

"Why go on about it, pup?" Kent said. Only from his fixed stare at her, Marriot knew that he had had as much as he could stand. "It's no use."

Cordelia's fingers, rough and covered with faint scars like a child's, held on to the edge of the desk near her.

"And if Major Heron doesn't go?"

"It's still no use."

Turning to Marriot again, with the same steadiness, she said,

"That's because of you, Davy. If it weren't for leaving you behind, he'd go."

Raging with compassion, Marriot lifted his burned claw and waved it ridiculously, like a rag.

"Good God, what an ass!"

"Except that it isn't true," Kent said coolly.

"You told me so," the girl said.

Kent's grief caught up a feeling of shame: during these few minutes she had stepped, without knowing it, perhaps, outside the familiar narrow life they had lived together—the three of them. She was no longer with them. He felt humiliated—by what? Her stubbornness in dragging at things best left alone? Of course—but there was more. He was ashamed, bitterly, because he was against her. He said carefully,

"You shouldn't say these things, they're no good, and it's not the reason."

"Then what is?"

Baffled,

"Never mind about that, it's not the point, the point is there's damn little chance of room in Jock's aircraft for any of us. But if he says he can take you—you must go."

She shook her head, slowly, weakly: in a thin voice she repeated,

"I can't. It's not worth it. I don't need to be separated from

you by hundreds of miles to know that being separated is the only utterly unbearable thing in the world. Nothing else that could happen to us, being short of food or killed—nothing—would be so hideous. It's the worst that could happen. The one thing there's no comfort for." Lifting her head, she looked him clearly in the face for the first time. He saw that she was saying: Don't torture me, my darling. "At any rate for me," she finished with the same calmness.

He looked back at her.

"For me, too."

"Then why talk nonsense?" she said with an attempt at a smile. "It's so simple. If we can't both go, we'll both stay. All I want is . . ." She turned her poor little smile from one young man to the other. "It's no good," she said, "you're both against me."

"What's the only thing you want, Browny?" Marriot asked, gently.

She waited a moment, drawing on a strength and a stubbornness of will she had not known she had until it was a question of fighting—she knew it—for her life itself, since without him she would only exist.

"I don't want to be sent off alone—that is, told to go. I'm not going, of course. If two can go, I want Andy to come with me. After all, we were all going; he doesn't stop being a pilot if he goes, they'll use him, he'll still be risking his life." She looked at him again. "If that's what you want."

"It isn't," he said curtly. He made a confused gesture. "There are ways and ways, of doing the same thing. Hanging on here, with everyone else who can't get away, may be what the old boy said"—he grinned—"my one moment."

"I could argue about that," Marriot said.

Kent turned on him with rage.

"Well, don't."

"Why not? You can't . . . "

"What about your hand? Who needs to go more, you or me?"

"Don't talk nonsense," Marriot said, smiling.

"Then don't irritate me."

"Yes, but, Andy," Cordelia said, "none of it makes sense. If this Colonel Lackland hadn't come—"

Kent interrupted her.

"I know, pup. And if he hadn't come, I should never have heard there was a choice."

She persisted.

"You'll be needed over there—to drop supplies, and I suppose to bomb things. And when it's all over and we come back—"

Marriot lifted his sound hand.

"If," he murmured.

She turned on him, trying to control her anger.

"He said we should come back."

Kent glanced curiously at Marriot.

"What's on your mind?"

His friend smiled very briefly.

"Nothing."

"Oh, yes, there is."

A slight hostility, the shadow thrown by their friendship itself, sharpened Marriot's voice.

"Mind-reader, are you?"

"I can read yours."

Marriot looked at him with a lively kindness, and shook his head.

Before Kent could speak again, Cordelia had got up and was standing in front of him. Now he saw too clearly how tired she was, pale, a shadow like a faint bruise under her eyes, her thin shoulders rounded. In the same instant he saw that she was forcing herself, with the last of her courage, to go on dragging at him. She spoke to him as if they were alone.

"Have sense, Andy. You're not like this man Heron, you're not having to choose between fighting and running away to live an ordinary easy life. You and I . . . No, I don't understand."

"What?"

"Your unkindness. Why you're leaving me. How can I understand it? It's—something I didn't expect. Don't you see?"

He did not look at her.

"It's a question of decency," he said at last. "Of the sort of fighting."

"How? Andy, look at me, please."

He had a sense that by looking her in the eyes he was preventing her from swaying and perhaps falling: at the same time he was leaning on her himself.

"Lackland asked me to stay here and act directly. Not just drop other people to do it. It may be years before we come back. If we ever do. It's now I'm wanted." He saw that she was listening without believing him, and said, "Try to see it—my little love. If it's possible for you to go you must. I can't go."

She looked at him intently for a moment longer, and then she had no more strength left: tears ran over her face, she put her hands out in a gesture of complete helpless despair, bewildered. His refusal destroyed her confidence in herself; she did not know what to say to him.

"Don't send me off," she stammered. "Let me stay here, please. I can't . . . you're spoiling everything . . ."

"But you must, yes, must go," Kent said. He had trouble in moving his tongue: it, and his whole body, were stiff.

She tried to control herself.

"But not alone. To live the whole of my life without you, Andy? I can't and I won't. Why, I might live for another fifty years!"

Marriot pulled himself out of his chair and made a step towards her. He was going to speak, but checked himself and stood, with a face of indecision and pity, watching.

Kent had given in: in a minute he would tell her so and set everything right; he needed a minute to get rid of, not bitterness, certainly not bitterness, but a feeling of acute relief and shame—he was being let off and he had failed. He knew, too, in this moment, that his love for her had changed; it was not now the happiness, the zest, of life, it was the shape itself of his life, joy, anguish, disappointment, shame, meaning. Nearly inaudibly, he said,

"Very well, pup, I give in. If one of them drops out— Heron or one of the old men—and if Jock wants to risk it, I'll go."

She did not move.

"Is it all right?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And if there's no room we stay."

He smiled wryly.

"You don't trust me?"

Marriot's voice, abrupt, made them both jump.

"There's no sane reason why either of you should go."

Kent turned round on him.

"What the devil are you talking about?"

Marriot hesitated. He looked from one to the other of them with smiling affection. At last,

"You're taking for granted that you've only one choice—America or this romantic nonsense of a maquis. . . . And you couldn't go into any maquis, you know, Browny, not with a baby."

Vexed, she said calmly,

"I know that."

"Don't be angry." He spoke to Kent. "You've thought of this yourself. If you go to America and the war goes on, what will you be doing? Making life hell for people here.

. . . You don't like the idea of dropping bombs on this country—which is what it will come to. That's why you prefer Lackland. Isn't it?"

"Part of it."

"Very well. If you go with this silly brute, with his puerile ideas—puerile, dead—you might as well go out there"—he glanced swiftly at the darkness outside, made black by the circle of light round them—"and jump over the cliff. Whatever happens, Lackland is done for. So are you if you join him."

He paused, and Kent asked quietly, "What are you getting at, Davy?"

The smile in Marriot's dark eyes became mocking.

"Talk of holding an outpost! You can't hold outposts against the future—Lackland can't, the Americans, with everything they've got, and their nerves and bad consciences into the bargain, can't. But why try? Why turn your back

to the future? Do you want it to kick your ass? That's exactly what it will do."

Kent was listening to him attentively, without any sign of approval.

"Well?"

Marriot thrust his head forward a little—as though the energy of his thin compact body were concentrated in it. He began to talk with a new and bitter vehemence.

"You didn't have to scrabble your way up from two rooms in a filthy street. I did. When I was living in them I loathed them. Once I'd escaped I had time to begin loathing the respectable people who think-how reasonably, how sensibly, how unanswerably-What a pity children live in such places. But, after all, what can we do? What do you expect us to do? We're not fairy godmothers. It costs a lot to keep a fine old society going, and its Etons, its expensive cars, its traditions, its luxury flats, its great hotels, its charm and high thinking. We do what we can afford, and if generations of families have lived and died in filth, why, they must be used to it and can wait their turn. . . . And they do wait. They wait." His voice rose slightly. "I can get used to anything, any fraud-after all, when you think how few years we live and then they bury us for ever-except a fraud practised on children. And any misery-except a child's. And you, you don't want to be killed for a society only fit for the comfortably old, or aggressive brutes like Lackland, and women who think-no, they don't think, their laziness and their horrible finger-nails think for them."

"I haven't thought it out yet," Kent said.

Relaxing, Marriot drew a long breath; the bitterness that had pinched his face vanished in a familiar gaiety.

"Time you began," he laughed. He added quietly, "Not that it matters. Stone-dead is dead, and a million Lacklands can't help it."

Without any excitement, Kent said,

"You're going to work for them, are you?"

"What do you think? I'm not ambitious, I don't pretend to be better than an honest technician. All I say is that between people who'll use me for a future and for children who are born free, and the others who say we can't afford it this year, I know which to choose. It's simple."

"You're going to work for them?"

"Yes."

Sunk in the relief of having got her way, and uneasy about it, Cordelia had been listening only with half an ear. She was startled.

"But, Davy, they're enemies," she said under her breath. "After all, you don't help an invader. You may have to put up with him, but you don't help him."

He did not glance at her.

"Browny, I'm very fond of you," he said gently, "but you don't know anything."

"I don't like it," said Kent.

"You mean-"

"I mean I don't like it. Your friends may be all you say they are, but I don't like their other habits."

After a minute, Marriot answered,

"I hoped you'd come with me, and think it out afterwards."

Kent looked at him with a peculiarly bright smile.

"What were you counting on? My stupidity?"

"No. On something else."

A silence. Kent's shoulders sagged a little, as though he were suddenly tired. Feeling angry—need Davy have sprung this on him?—and at a loss, he muttered,

"I think you're mad. But I don't suppose it matters." Marriot frowned.

"It might matter so much you ought to hand me over to Lackland," he said drily.

This amused Kent. "I don't think you can do all that damage." He grinned. "It's heads or tails. If you're right, I'm wrong—and vizz vozz, as Smith says. But for the life of me I don't see why you should think your hairy friends will do things any better."

"Better?" shouted Marriot. "What d'you mean, better? For years we shall have to work like dogs—and on top of it we shall be fighting. At the very best, we'll be cleaning up a white guard. Types like Lackland. D'you know what, Andy—if he weren't intelligent and honest I shouldn't hate him. What right has he to turn honesty and intelligence over to death? to serve death? Why does he want it so much? Can't he wait? . . . He's dangerous, but not repulsive. . . . When I think of the soft greedy bellies in America, the suckers, the cowards, the rats, and the imbeciles everywhere—everywhere—who think they can push history back without rotting their hands—"

Kent had watched him with a cool smile, now he laughed gently. His friend looked at him.

"Yes," he said, in a suppressed voice, "you think I'm cracked. I'll tell you something. You won't be content, you won't be able to live without a future—not for long . . ."

Unnoticed by any of them, Smith appeared in the doorway. He stood there.

"Well, well. But if nothing is to be any better?" Kent mocked.

"Neither better nor worse, but alive. New. The new thing. Hope."

Abruptly, Kent lost patience.

"All right. Don't let's talk about it."

"As you like."

"Just one thing. What the devil do you propose to do? Stroll up to a Russian and say: God bless you, I love you. Why should he trust you?"

Marriot said, very slowly,

"I have a friend or two already. And then—" he stopped.

"And then what?"

Marriot was silent, but the answer slid into his friend's mind.

"I see. You're counting on that page of notes you picked up in Garra House. It's worth something, they'll want it—" "You dirty tyke."

No louder than usual, Smith's voice shocked them. He came into the room, not hurrying himself at all, and halted in front of Marriot, staring, his pale eyes fixedly open. Cordelia had jumped up.

"What the devil do you want?" Marriot said. "Get out of here."

"Not I," Smith said quietly. "First I'll tell you what I think of you, you young ape—ape it is, to swallow so much muck—then I'll sort out what's to be done."

"You will, will you?" Kent said, with rage. "You'll mind your own damned business."

Smith glanced at him with a sly, almost friendly smile.

"And what's my business? It seems I'm the only one here

knows you don't turn round and join yourself on to a lot of murdering foreigners—whatever you do it for: because you like 'em or because they'll pay you."

"Yes, that's true," Cordelia said, with anxiety, "but Mr. Marriot didn't mean it."

"He meant it," answered Smith-civil, unmoved.

In a mocking voice, Marriot asked,

"What do you know about anything? You don't think, you do as you're told."

The hard shrewd contempt in Smith's little eyes did not change.

"Maybe I do as I'm told, and maybe I think, too. Anyhow enough to have pulled th' quilt off of your new thing and caught her dowsing it with a policeman. We don't want that here—"

"Mind your tongue a bit, Smith," Kent interrupted.

"A pity if you lost it," Marriot smiled, "you wouldn't be able to lick so many boots in future."

With apparent suddenness, Smith lost his temper. His sallow face darkened, he spat on one hand, wiping it on the other sleeve, and said slowly,

"Now, me lad, I'll give you the thrashing you want."

Kent stepped between them. "Behave yourself, you fool," he shouted.

The door from the corridor opened: in a sharp voice Lackland asked,

"What the hell do you mean by all this noise?"

Kent was infuriated by his tone, and cool enough at the same time to be anxious to get rid of him. Keep the army out of this, he thought: he said pleasantly, "Sorry, sir. I'm afraid we've got into the habit of treating this room as our own."

Smith's slow anger was too hot still for his instinctive prudence.

"The noise," he said steadily, "is because we have a rat here."

Kent glared at him.

"Hold your tongue, Smith."

"What?" Lackland asked. "What's this?"

"A private argument," Kent said.

"You're nothing but a young ignorant lad," Smith said. Turning to Lackland, he said, "This chap"—a jerk of his head towards Marriot—"thinks he should go over to them, to the Roossians. He has something he's pinched, some sort of paper—he thinks they want it—"

"How do you know this?"

"He said so, I heard him."

"You think you heard," Kent said quietly.

Ignoring him, Lackland turned an intimidating glance on Smith.

"When did you hear this?"

"Just now. I was-"

Lackland interrupted.

"You heard him say he was working for the Reds, and he'd stolen something, a paper, he meant to hand over to them?"

Smith hesitated. His anger was cooling off, and he had begun to wonder uncomfortably what he was meddling in. Maybe I'd have done better to hold me tongue, he thought, vexed.

"Well?" Lackland insisted.

"Not exactly that, sir—" he glanced, briefly, without moving his head, at Kent, and met a look so threatening that it annoyed him: he closed his mind and said stolidly, "He mentioned he had friends there."

"And the paper?"

Kent laughed shortly.

"Nothing was said about a paper. The man's a fool."

"Nay, that I'm not, and you know it," muttered Smith.

"Don't interfere," Lackland said. "You're sure about the paper?" he asked Smith.

With a blank face, Smith answered,

"Yes, sir."

"Anything else?"

"No, sir."

Cordelia had moved so that she was standing immediately behind Kent. She asked him in a whisper, "What's happening?" "Nothing." He smiled. As little reassured as if he had said, God knows, she touched his arm lightly. He did not glance at her.

For the first time, Lackland turned his attention to Marriot. The young man was standing slackly, one knee on the dilapidated arm of a chair, his useless arm dangling. He had listened attentively. His glance moved from one to the other without nervousness.

"What have you got to say?" demanded Lackland.

A derisive smile moved across Marriot's eyes.

"Why should I say anything to you?"

"You understand what this means?"

"I don't even understand what you mean. You're not exactly lucid."

Lackland scrutinised him with a detached interest: his

eyes moved from the young man's face to his withered hand, over his battle-dress, back again, with an inquisitive gleam, to his face.

"Don't play the innocent. It's silly."

Marriot as it were brought his derisive smile forward, so that his face became arrogant, but it was an arrogance as little suited to him as a glove on a child's hot restless hand. He said nothing.

"Are you a communist?" Lackland asked.

The derision left Marriot's face: he said quietly,

"Yes."

"A member of the party?"

"No. Yes."

"Which do you mean?"

Silence.

"Are you trying to be discreet? Or you simply have no lie ready?"

"You know that the communist party doesn't exist now," Marriot said.

"Where is this paper you stole?"

"Find it," Marriot said, with a smile. He seemed light-hearted suddenly, as though he had decided to treat the thing as a joke. Kent, looking at him, knew that he had become bored—it happened to him quickly nowadays. Staring fixedly, he tried to warn him. With despair, he realised that Marriot, under his amusement, felt only a rash contempt for Lackland.

Lackland had taken his revolver from its case. "Where is it?" he repeated.

Still smiling, the young man did not speak.

"Don't make things worse," Cordelia said abruptly. "It's in his pocket-book."

"God damn you, Browny . . . "

Obeying the jerk of Lackland's head, Smith gripped Marriot round the body, coming behind him with arms like cords, almost as thin and hard. For a moment, Marriot tried to wrench himself free: he heard Lackland say, "Go through him—you," and saw Kent hesitate and decide, with fury, to spare him Lackland's own attentions.

"Sorry, Davy," Kent muttered.

Marriot stood still and let him find the pocket-book, take from it the folded paper and pass it to Lackland.

"Thanks. Go and ask General Thorburn to come here."

Kent did not move. In a low voice, Cordelia said,

"I'll go."

"He's probably in bed."

"Well, never mind," she said, with a slight smile.

She went out quickly. Lackland glanced after her with an air of displeasure, turned to Smith, and asked him brusquely,

"Where were you when you heard this officer talk?"

Reluctant and vexed, Smith said,

"I was in the doorway-outside."

Lackland said nothing more. The silence was heavy, as though pressed down by the darkness on the edges of the room, and the dark air outside. At one moment Kent thought he heard the noise, at a great height, of an aeroplane: he listened, glancing at Marriot, who looked back at him without any expression, except of sleepy good-humour. Does he know what we're in for? Kent thought—he realised in the same instant that he did not know that himself. . . . It was

not an aeroplane; if it had been anything, it was the sea, at the foot of the cliffs, turning in its sleep. Then a breath moved the reeds, so that they rasped the wall outside, near the door.

The general came in, pulling desperately at the band of his trousers, and buttoning the jacket across his stained wrinkled shirt. Clarke was with him, in trousers and a pyjama jacket: he hobbled to an armchair, his hand pressing Cordelia's shoulder so that the girl could scarcely walk. When he released her, she straightened herself with an effort.

"What's this, what's this?" Thorburn grumbled.

Lowering his body into a chair, he listened, as if uninterested, to Lackland's precise account, his head tilted back, so that the light falling over his face allowed him to drop his eyelids: he might have been pondering anything under cover of a sermon. When he moved, it was to stare at Marriot. He reflected that the young man looked decent, intelligent; he had a good forehead, his dark eyes were quite remarkably kind and attentive; certainly he was not a blackguard. As soon as Lackland finished,

"Well, my boy, what do you want to say for yourself?" he asked.

After only a brief hesitation, Marriot answered,

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Nonsense. What d'you mean by that?"

"I mean that there is nothing to say," Marriot said softly. Thorburn shook his head impatiently.

"Come, don't be silly."

Marriot looked at him with amusement and liking.

"Colonel Lackland has said everything, and said it fairly. The only thing I could add—I consider his schemes antisocial and vile. And I shall do all I can to stop them." He hesitated and repeated, "All."

Staring at him with dismay and horror, Kent said, "Why didn't I know you were round the bend?"

"Because I'm not, you fool," Marriot said, smiling.

Lackland turned to the general: you could not say there was satisfaction in his manner, still less triumph, yet the movement itself of his strong short body was a conclusion; he had brought down his man—it was enough.

"If you'll allow me, sir, to point out the implications," he began coldly. "It's true he knows little, but the little he does know would be uncommonly useful to—"

Thorburn cut him short, with a sudden air of weariness.

"Yes, yes, I agree with you. No need to drag it out."

"It must," Lackland said, "be dealt with before the aeroplane arrives—a matter probably of a few hours."

"Yes, yes."

With a sharp movement of his hands, Kent said stiffly,

"I can't see what this has to do with you. You're not in charge of this airfield."

He had spoken to Lackland, who answered,

"Hold your tongue."

"It's out of your hands, my boy," Thorburn said. "I'm afraid you must keep quiet." The look on Kent's face distressed him; he turned from it hurriedly to the girl. "Run along to bed," he said, "this isn't the place for a young woman."

She stared at him without answering, obstinate and indifferent, as though what he had said was too obtuse to be noticed at all, and moved quietly to stand beside Kent, almost

touching him. This brought her close as well to Marriot. Thorburn was struck by a sense that the three of them were together in a way that was not simply physical nearness. With a pang of grief, he looked away from it.

"Shut the door," he ordered Smith. Need we, he said to himself, have all that staring in?

Smith shut it. He came back uneasily and slowly to stand between the two groups, like a dog between two masters, a dog in an ill temper, at that.

At this moment, the other door opened noiselessly. Hutton came through, shut it again without a sound and stood with his back to it, stiffly.

Settling himself in his chair, the general exchanged a shrewd glance with Clarke, turned to Lackland, and said in a voice at once fatigued and careless,

"I take it you want to talk."

As confident as if he thought they were eager to hear him, Lackland walked briskly to the desk. Seated there, he looked round, with the smallest flicker of irony in his glance. Thorburn had sunk his head on his chest: without lifting it he watched Lackland. Plain broad face, a very slight smile—the smile, reserved and fine, of a priest—on the thin lips: they were thin but not mean, simply reliant and severe. An actor who knows his part backwards, thought the general, and then was ashamed. No, he corrected himself guiltily, he's a good soldier, he knows what he has to do, that's all.

Leaning back, one arm on the desk, fingers tapping lightly, because he was at ease, Lackland said,

"There are two possible ways of dealing with the fellow. I think only two. He can be taken to the States, and locked up there in whatever zoo they run for animals of his type. He

can be treated as if the Home Army were fully in existence"—he paused briefly, marking his point with a rapid chord—"as in effect it is—and the only executive arm of the administration—"

Without moving, Thorburn asked,

"Administration? What administration?"

"—of the government in exile. . . . I repeat—we can act as if the Home Army were in full existence, and deal with him as a military court deals with deserters or spies. . . . As I see it, it is impossible to take him to America—we can't give someone's seat in the aeroplane to him." His fingers ceased to tap. "In fact, it's unpleasant but simple."

Clarke had listened to him with attention. Cocking one eyebrow at him, he said,

"Simple but unpleasant, I think you mean, old boy, simple but unpleasant."

Thorburn said nothing. Marriot, who had not taken his eyes from Lackland since he began speaking, said quietly,

"You mean-shoot me."

Almost drily, Lackland replied, "Yes."

Still looking at him, Marriot said,

"Fair enough."

Smith started violently. He took a dazed step forward, and stumbled against the chair nearest Kent. In a stupefied voice, he said,

"But you can't do that, sir."

Kent gripped his arm, savagely, and muttered,

"See what you've done, you fool, see what you've done."

Smith looked from the pilot's flushed contorted face to Lackland's calm one: beside himself with dislike of the officer, he stammered. "Eh, you brute, if I'd known you were going to overdo it like this, I'd have kept me mouth shut."

Kent gave his arm a final twist and dropped it.

"Well, you can keep it shut now," he said. He turned to Cordelia. They looked at each other in silence for a moment. The girl murmured something, and turned to walk quietly out of the room. Only Clarke saw her go.

The general had shifted in his chair so that he was facing the desk and Lackland. Something that was neither hostility nor understanding—but partook of both kinds—passed between them.

"Come now, aren't you running ahead of your book?" Thorburn said almost casually. "The Home Army—except on paper—isn't in existence. Nor is the overseas government."

"The government, sir, hasn't ceased to exist because some of its members are still in the cruisers taking them overseas. The essential people, the men who take the decisions, have been flown over already. As I think you know."

"All right," Thorburn said after a moment, "I'll give you the utmost—a legal basis for your court and the rest of it. All the same, I don't feel that the political ideas of this foolish young man are serious."

In his relief, Kent smiled at Clarke. He was taken aback when the brigadier, pulling down the corners of his mouth, shook his head slowly.

Lackland's voice, still brisk—you might say, dapper—startled him by its sudden harshness. Harsh, rasping—Kent shivered, in a nearly physical revulsion.

"In peace-time, in any well-established society, such as ours was, a political act, even a conspiracy against the State, doesn't threaten the safety, or the existence, of the nation. But in a country which is in danger—I scarcely think I need point out to you in what danger—any threat is a threat to its mere existence, and must be dealt with ruthlessly. A country whose life and freedom is threatened can't afford to be indulgent or generous—"

"I hope," Thorburn said with a ferocious contempt, "that it can afford to be just."

Lackland's eye sparkled.

"It can afford an emergency justice. In civil life one waits —is it so decent or reasonable, after all?—until a murder is committed before condemning the murderer in a proper manner, with wigs and black caps. You don't, I think, really feel that a State in mortal danger can wait, wig in hand, to have its throat cut. The sole result being that the assassins become the State!"

He flung his arm out across the desk, arpeggios rippling from his fingers. Thorburn watched him with an expression which from being cold and arrogant became strangely inquisitive. Scratching himself,

"H'm, yes . . . yes . . . it's exactly what our bolshevik friends—and all other dictators before them—have always said. Their excuse for murdering political opponents and critics and so on."

"We're still at war," Lackland said swiftly. "The fellow is a deserter and a spy. He happens to be under military justice, not political."

"Much the same thing," muttered Thorburn.

Staring at the colonel with an ironical smile, Clarke said, "You're a clever fellow, Lackland. You'll go far."

Lackland answered in a civil, almost a deferential tone.

"You are going to America yourself, sir. The fact that this chap can denounce his countrymen will be of little importance to you."

At this moment Cordelia came back, with Emil Breuner. As he came in, unsmiling, he glanced from one to the other, a quick searching glance, but said nothing. For no reason, the sight of his brown face, his neatness, the almost elegance of his dark-clad body, aggravated in Kent the sense he had of being caught in an unpleasant dream. The room, which had always seemed large, had shrunk: he wanted impatiently to open the door and let the night air into it, and with it the airfield, the sea, the immense dark bubble of the sky, indifferent, cancelling this room, the living body of his friend near him, Lackland's mouth talking coldly about justice . . . cancelling the weak cries lost in it of children dying of their wounds and of terror, of the women whose eyes the heat of the bombs-was it Clarke had talked about it, or Lackland?had melted in their heads . . . cancelling the tortures, the fears, the hunger, the deaths . . . He pulled himself back sharply. Isn't one nightmare at a time enough? he thought drily.

Looking at Marriot, he saw that he had—for the first moment, perhaps—understood that he might be going to be killed. Who else would have known it—since the only sign was the slight trembling of Marriot's lips? A feeling of rage seized him. He felt giddy.

Marriot looked at Lackland with a fixed stare.

"I've denounced no one. You've no reason to suppose I would. You want to shoot me for something you think I might do, some day." He hesitated, and said in a strangely

young weak voice, "You'll do it because, politically, I'm on the other side—nothing more."

"A taste of your own medicine," Lackland said quietly. "Have you any idea how many honest men your friends have strung up for no worse crime than being on the other side? In 1943 I was fighting with them." Of its own accord his left hand went up to touch the patch over his eye. "If I'd been one of their own people they'd have rewarded me afterwards by shooting me. . . . You, too," he said with sudden sharpness, to Kent. He glanced briefly and forbiddingly at Smith. "And you."

"If you say so, sir," Kent said.

Smith cleared his throat.

"What the lad wants is a good thrashing. I'd have given him it and had done."

He met Lackland's glance with a stolid reserve.

A hatred and a bitterness he could not control seized Marriot.

"I'm not a deserter," he said between stretched lips. "I'm not clearing out to live on a pension. Nor am I carrying on an American war against our own people. Against the men and women who want to make the country fit to live in. Fit for anyone except tired old men and bastards."

"My poor fellow," Thorburn said, "you don't think that's what your friends are handing you out, do you?"

Marriot turned on him.

"You don't believe you ought to kill me—for no reason. Except that you're afraid I might take it into my head to behave badly—some time—perhaps next year."

The general's face twitched.

"Surely that's exactly what your co-religionists do as a regular habit!"

"Excuse me," Marriot said swiftly, "I believe we're always at war—either against ourselves—anyone can go wrong—or against famine or microbes. But you—you'd be going against everything you believe—" a sudden passion made him raise his voice—"wouldn't you? Whatever this bastard thinks, you'd know you were murdering me . . ."

The general looked at him with half-smiling kindness.

"Shut up, you're talking too much."

"If I'm a deserter," interrupted Marriot, "why don't you shoot that pompous ass Heron for sneaking off to America?"

"A damn sight too much," Clarke said under his breath.

Cordelia touched Breuner on the arm.

"Why don't you say something?" she whispered. She was pale, even her lips; her hands were shaking.

Breuner said quietly,

"This is the first time I am not an exile. I am not even in England."

Clarke rolled an eye at him.

"I don't quite take you, old boy."

"It could be anywhere in the darkness of Europe."

Beside herself, Cordelia said roughly,

"Oh, what is the good of talking politics? You said you would help."

"I am sorry," he murmured. "It is not really politics." He turned his eyes—a film had come over their brightness, because he was unhappy, or because he had not slept—on Lackland. With an unconscious formality he said, "Colonel Lackland, you are treating this boy—he is a boy—as if he were rather vile. You will forgive me, but I think you are wrong.

Of course he would be behaving foolishly, perhaps with wicked foolishness, if he gave away valuable information to the enemy. But you should, surely, pay some attention to his motives? It is a kind of young excitement and idealism—don't you agree? And it's not incurable."

For a moment it looked as though Lackland were going to ignore him. Then he said curtly,

"I daresay. If this were a classroom—or if we were not at war—talk about motives would do no harm. This happens to be a question of security. Your what d'you call it?—psychology—is out of place."

"Yes—no doubt. But, if there are only a few who believe like him, it is not serious. If there are a great many, all is already lost."

"Oh, rubbish," Lackland said.

In an even gentler and easier voice, Breuner persisted,

"We should reflect whether the idea of justice, and the idea of people being innocent when they have not yet done their crime—perhaps I should say, the passion for justice, perhaps it is not only an idea—whether it isn't part of the human estate, so to speak—and ought to be saved. Perhaps it oughtn't to be let go—either in the hope of saving something else, a country even—or simply out of despair."

Lackland struck the edge of the desk, with his fingers, a light sharp sound.

"That's enough nonsense."

Marriot looked at Breuner with a caressing smile.

"You're out of date."

"Yes-I think so," Breuner murmured.

The general shifted his great shoulders about his chair like a dog trying to make itself comfortable in bed. An expression between disgust and annoyance came across his face when he had settled himself, and could attend to Lackland.

"Psychology may at this stage be out of place," he said testily. "I'm by no means convinced yet that this poor silly fellow can do any harm."

After a moment,

"Have you any right, sir, out of"—Lackland half closed his eyes—"charity, or because you don't admit that liberal ideas are admirable in their place and flat treachery out of it . . . have you the right to let him loose on us? All very fine to feel sorry for him—I'm sorry for him myself. I shall feel a deal sorrier for any decent chap of ours who's caught and strung up because this wretched fellow told what he knew about our plans."

"Oh, nonsense—nonsense—a young ass, of no importance."

The change in Lackland's face might have been anger or resolution.

"The chain of hands can be as long as you like—from this boy to ditches where people are shot in the neck."

Thorburn frowned.

"Yes, yes . . . Then let me say no more than that, as one member of a military court—a highly irregular military court—you can't impose the sentence."

For the first time, Lackland's air of respect cracked. He raised his voice.

"You'd take it on yourself to turn this chap loose?"

"Don't be impudent," Thorburn said, staring.

Breuner came forward slowly to the desk.

"Can I see this paper you took from him?" he asked. "Why?"

"I am a scientist," said Breuner mildly. "I shall know what it is, perhaps."

"Show it to him," ordered Thorburn.

Lackland handed the sheet of squared paper across the desk into the slender brown hand held out for it. He turned, with an air of deference, to Thorburn.

"I should like you to consider, sir, that this is not a military court. It is a maquis court. You yourself are leaving the country in a few hours. Before you leave you release a man who means, at the first opportunity, to betray the people you are leaving behind. Whether you can justify it at G.H.Q. is not my affair. I fail to see how you justify it to yourself."

Before the general could answer, Breuner laid the paper down on the desk in front of Lackland, murmuring,

"This is not very important."

"What do you mean?" demanded Lackland.

"It is already quite well known about."

Clarke lifted his doubled hand and shot out a stubby finger, pointing at Marriot. His voice broke on something between a yelp and a jeer.

"Aha, me cunning Roman . . ."

"Are you sure?" the colonel asked Breuner.

"I am quite sure."

"As you like," said Lackland curtly. "It's irrelevant."

Breuner looked anxiously at Thorburn.

"Is it?"

"I'm afraid so."

As if to avoid looking at any of them, Breuner hung his head: he said very slowly,

"No one has asked him if he will hold his tongue-not pass

on what he heard from Colonel Lackland yesterday evening."

"Useless," Lackland said ironically. "They lie as a matter of tactics."

A silence.

"How old are you?" Thorburn asked Marriot abruptly. "Twenty-two."

Thorburn rubbed his head with the side of his fist.

A year younger than the other one, he thought. Much cleverer—and much simpler. Deeper in the sergeant-pilot than his intellect, he suspected a simplicity and a moral intransigence capable of any folly—and any heroism. And, my God, how little heroism serves, he felt wearily; how much better off we should be with less of it and more kindness and modesty.

"Will you-if I kick you through that door-will you hold your tongue?"

Marriot did not speak.

Scarcely feeling Cordelia grip his arm, Kent watched him with anguish. He knew, having come up against it more than once, the pigheadedness that was his friend's answer to any circumstance when to avoid trouble, or only to get his way, he would need to persuade, humble himself a little. He would try everything short of humility, and then resign himself. Pride? Recklessness? Either or both, Kent groaned. In the end, only an irreducible obstinacy. Against his better judgement, he broke out,

"For God's sake, Davy, tell them you're not a sod." Thorburn was watching the young man attentively. "Take it seriously, boy."

Glancing at him calmly and then at Lackland, Marriot said,

"No."

"Oh, you bloody fool," Kent said. Rage and despair dried up his mouth. He took a step forward, and stood helplessly. "You're mad." He forced himself to shut off his panic before it could say another word. The colonel's neat voice, unemotional, tailed off as if it were coming back at him from a moving train.

"Well, sir, you see?"

Gnawing his underlip, Thorburn did not answer.

Clarke leaned forward and tapped Breuner on the arm.

"You spoke out of your turn," he said, slyly, but with a tart anger. "If you'd been in the army as long as I have, you'd have known enough not to put your oar in."

Marriot spoke rapidly, with a controlled passion.

"None of you see anything," he said. "You don't even see that you're dead. That the only thing you're still able to do is to kill living people. In the same way exactly as bodies, if you let them lie about, and rats, breed cholera." He stood with a nervous immobility, unable to go on, his life had now to be crammed into so few words—it was impossible and it was all nonsense. "For all I know, you can infect and kill everyone still alive in this country. Even then it won't be yours, for you to colonise from overseas with privileged brutes, rich greedy lazy women, with mystifiers and hangmen, living on new generations of humble people. It belongs to the future. Not to you. Never again to you." For the first time he looked directly at Lackland, and said quietly, "You'll do as you like to me. If I could, I'd do the same to you. Before you and your lot can start their murders. That's all."

Turning to Thorburn, Emil Breuner said,

"It is a risk I would take."

"You're not a soldier," Thorburn said, with a sadness coming from the depths of his fatigue.

"No. But if I am in this country I am as much in his hands
. . . I have a horror of human sacrifice."

Thorburn stood up. He stared at Marriot's face for a moment or two, absently, as if he were seeing other things through it, then glanced at his useless arm and shrunken twisted fingers.

"I think I understand you," he said. "You believe you're acting on behalf of an idea. Let's call it a religion. In fact, and the circumstances being what they are, you've behaved as a spy, you are a spy. You can't complain if you're treated as one."

He paused for so long that Lackland, impatient, began speaking. The glance he got silenced him in the middle of his first word. Thorburn went on.

"This doesn't prevent my being sorry for you . . . I'm afraid I can't protect you."

Marriot answered him in a voice at once mocking and careless.

"It helps me no end to know I'm being murdered reasonably and sympathetically."

Turning away from him, Thorburn spoke to Breuner.

"I don't ask you to approve, I know you don't, or you won't. But I should like you to realise that I'm responsible for a great many lives. Neither you nor I have any notion how many." A something meant for a smile showed his blackened teeth for an instant. "I'm sure that in the third form you read the story about the dyke, and the hole in it

no bigger than a child's fist—it had to be stopped up or it would have drowned the country . . ."

"If it is the same story," murmured Breuner, "I remember that the child stopped it with his own hand."

"Ah," Thorburn said, with an effort, "you don't help me." Breuner was silent.

"Which of you," asked Marriot quietly, "is going to do me in?"

As if he were talking to himself—he was, perhaps—Clarke said,

"No, it's a bad business."

"You, of course," Marriot said to Lackland. His glance rested for less than a second on the faces of Kent and the girl, seeing only Kent's lips pressed together, eyes half-shut, a mask he had seen before, in a moment of extreme danger. He looked away from it, and watched Lackland get up and walk to the door. Opening it, the colonel stood looking out. A greyness that was neither dawn nor night had taken the place of the brief darkness. It must be about one o'clock.

With a brusque gesture, Thorburn said,

"Miss Hugh-Brown, I should be obliged if you would go."

Anxious to get rid of her, he kept out of his voice the futile pity roused in him by her youth and weariness. We are all tired, and she ought not to be here, he thought, hardening his heart. He was vexed when she said,

"No, I can't."

Lackland turned round and spoke to Thorburn.

"It's not light yet. Have to wait an hour or two. I don't want to make a"—he hesitated, his mouth held open while he sought for the word, lips wrinkled—"a bad show of it."

"That's fair enough," Marriot said, without any apparent irony.

Cordelia moved towards him, her face made so grotesque by her effort to keep quiet that Thorburn put his arm out to stop her. She flung it off violently, rounding on him.

"Why did you come here? And why have you turned into murderers? That's what you are, and you're disgusting. You're going to kill one of us, and you make it worse by talking about security and justice . . . I couldn't have believed that people like you exist."

"Quiet, lass, quiet," Kent said, under his breath.

She turned.

"You won't stand for it, Andy-you can't."

"This woman must go away," said Lackland coldly. He gave Breuner a peremptory glance. "Help her out, please. You."

Breuner looked at her but did not move.

"Run away, Browny," Marriot said.

She looked at him. In a more urgent voice he repeated,

"No, run away. It's all you can do for me. Go away, old Browny-at once. Don't speak."

"All right, Davy."

She even smiled at him—and turned instantly to Breuner.

"Shall we go?" she asked him politely.

He nodded, but did not follow her at once. He looked attentively into Marriot's face for a second. "I am sorry. If I could I would help you," he said softly. He walked away, stumbling a little from fatigue. Kent had walked with Cordelia to the door; he held her arm and whispered to her briefly, then pushed her gently out, and held the door for Breuner. Hutton had stepped out of the way hurriedly, and

was gazing fixedly, as though his eyeballs were immovable, over their heads.

"Do you mind, sir, if I lie down for an hour?" Lackland said. "My wrist is tired and very stiff—too much penpushing."

"Do anything you please."

"Very good, sir."

He glanced round the room, beckoned Hutton—the young soldier strode forward promptly, with an air of embarrassment—and gave him his revolver.

"You'll look after that door"—nodding towards the air-field. "You"—he glanced at Smith—"are responsible for the other. . . . No one else need stay with the prisoner." He swung round on Kent. "This goes for you."

Kent swallowed his rage. He felt sweat running from his armpits.

"It does, does it?" he said quietly. "But the fact is, I'm still in charge of this airfield, and I prefer to stay here."

Surprisingly without displeasure, the colonel hesitated. As he opened his mouth to speak, Thorburn said roughly,

"He's right. He ought to stay. What's more, I propose to stay here myself." He waved an arm at Smith. "You—you can go. Be off."

Smith moved his head involuntarily to look at Marriot. The sergeant-pilot looked back at him with unsmiling mockery. Straightening himself—he had been standing with bent shoulders and sagging arms—Smith turned clumsily and went away without saying a word. Marriot shrugged his shoulders.

Levering himself out of his chair, Clarke muttered,

"This is no place for poor Willie Clarke. I'm worn out.

I've never attended one of these affairs, and I'm too old to start a new habit. I'll say good-night to you."

No one answered him, and as he shuffled out he felt a sudden lifting of his spirits. For the last hour he had been keeping at its distance an idea too good to be true—that his lumbago was about to leave him. No doubt about it now, he was all but free of it: he felt tempted to hum, and resisted. Poor lad, he thought; it's a rotten business and I don't like it. . . . The new feeling of ease in his body exhilarated him. Praise be to God I can stand up, he thought . . .

"I must remind you," Lackland began curtly.

Thorburn cut him rudely short.

"My dear chap, there's nothing more you need remind us of. For God's sake go and lie down."

As soon as the door closed, Thorburn seated himself in an armchair near the desk, collapsing into it, shoulders drawn up, arms hanging over the sides of the chair. He moved one of them with an effort, to unbutton his jacket, and leaned back again, closing his eyes. For the first time since the door on to the airfield had been opened, he felt in the room a cool breath. He was thankful for it; the day would probably be too hot. Then he thought that Marriot would not feel it. The thought pierced his exhaustion. It was sharper and more unbearable than his thoughts of the defeat. This, too, was a defeat.

There was a silence. The two young men looked at each other, and Marriot tried to smile.

"Can I have a drink?" he asked.

"Beer or water?"

"Beer."

Kent went out of the room to get it, and Hutton, standing

in the doorway with his back to the airfield, moved quietly a couple of steps forward.

Marriot smiled.

"I shan't try to bolt."

"That's all right," Hutton said indistinctly. He turned red—as always when he had to speak to any one of the persons he thought of as "them," animals not of his race.

His awkwardness and embarrassment infected Marriot; he wanted to say something friendly, but nothing occurred to him. He glanced at his wrist.

"Damn it, my watch has stopped," he said under his breath. He noticed the tone of his voice, hearing it spoken in his ear.

Carrying a cup and jug, Kent returned, and Hutton shifted back to the open doorway: he kept his finger on the trigger of the revolver, and stared at Marriot's left shoulder.

"What time is it?" asked Marriot.

"Nearly half-past one," Kent said. He gave Marriot the cup he had filled. "Here you are."

Marriot emptied it.

"More?"

"Yes, I'm thirsty."

He drank the second cupful, dropped the cup on the desk, and held out his wrist with the watch.

"Here. Unstrap this and give it to Browny to keep for you. Then the next time you lose yours—" he broke off, smiled briefly at Hutton, and said, "Y'know, he loses everything."

Kent looked at him without moving. After a moment Marriot let his arm fall. He glanced at Thorburn, and saw that he had fallen asleep. His head hung sideways over one shoulder. Its look of authority and placid arrogance had slipped from his face, it was only old and exhausted; a thread of saliva fell from the lower corner of his mouth, which was open. His body sagged.

Following his glance, Kent turned to look at the old man; he gazed at him for a second and turned swiftly back.

"Davy-"

Marriot smiled with his eyes.

"Yes, old dear?"

"You could have stalled."

"I could." He yawned suddenly.

"Why, in God's name ,why didn't you?"

He hesitated, and said softly,

"I don't know, but it just struck me . . . there's very little one obscure person, that's David Marriot, can do at a time as deathly hard for people as this—you didn't imagine I think a revolution is pleasant!—except his job. My job—as scientist—only exists so far as I'm absolutely honest. And then"—he glanced briefly at his burned hand—"I'm not sure whether I'm worth very much now." He laughed, and said simply, "I couldn't be bothered to lie to them, you know. I tell you I hate the old. Everyone over forty-five is a scoundrel—oughtn't to be alive."

"Are you sure," Kent said quickly, "you didn't get yourself wrapped up as one way out?"

Marriot did not answer.

"If I'd known you were in that state-"

"What state?" asked Marriot, yawning. "I'm not."

Kent moved nearer to him, stooping a little to bring his face level with his friend's, and said in a low voice,

"Christ's blood, Davy, what are we going to do?"

Marriot felt exhausted.

"Ask me!"

His back to Hutton, Kent went through a brief pantomime of strangling him. It started a ripple of amusement in Marriot. He shook his head.

"Do you want to be put off like a dog with the mange?" Kent asked in a fierce whisper.

"No." He hesitated, and passed his hand over his face. Smiling—it was, he felt, a poor sort of smile, but he found it difficult to push aside his weariness. "You know what I'm like, I hate to run after a bus because I think if I miss it what a fool I shall look. No million-to-one chances for me, thank you. . . . And get it in the stomach, very likely. Very careless, these army types." He yawned again. "Sorry—I can't stop yawning."

"But for these cows, we should have been over there by now."

"I wasn't going."

"What?"

"I meant to clear off at the last minute," Marriot said. "What d'you think?"

Kent moved his hands helplessly.

"You're not sane."

"No-listen, Andy. If it makes it any better for you, I believe what I said to them."

"I know. It doesn't help."

"Oh," said Marriot easily, "my being turned off isn't important, except to me. There are too many of us. What's an endless defeat for Thorburn and the rest is for us . . . certainty . . . comprehension . . ."

Kent looked at him.

"If I went into Lackland's army, and you caught me—would you string me up?"

"Luckily, you're not going in," Marriot answered, after a moment.

A silence. Kent turned roughly on Hutton.

"Do you like this?"

Hutton said nothing for a full minute.

"No."

"It's murder, isn't it?"

Hutton moved his shoulders convulsively: he clenched his free hand, stared at Marriot, and mumbled,

"Why aren't you on the same side as the rest of us?"

"No time to tell you that now," said Marriot lightly. Another gaping yawn seized him.

Unnoticed by any of them, Thorburn woke up, suddenly, as he had dropped asleep. He sat on unmoving in his chair, not even lifting a hand to dry the moisture he felt on his chin. In his broad face, his eyes seemed to have dwindled; they were scarcely visible below ragged grey lids, yet nothing else in his face lived.

"He's pigheaded—a perfect bloody fool—I know him. I tell you he's not a swine. . . . There are three of us here, you and us. Do we have to cut each other's throats because a crew of old bastards says so?"

Hutton blushed: his eyes, very small, purely blue, started in his head with the effort he made to overcome his diffidence and distrust of words. It was not that he did not know clearly what he wanted to say; he knew very well, in his short life he had had time to turn over, slowly, the ideas he had found in his mind, seemingly rooted there, he would

have been put to it to know when. Turning a still darker red, he spoke in a fierce mutter,

"If th' country's invaded, I'm against th' invader, whoever he is."

"Yes, but what sort of a country?" persisted Kent. "Fine country where we're all crawling about doing each other in."

"I'm sorry for him," Hutton said, with the same effort, "but he knew where he was going."

Kent's face was no less crimson than Hutton's; his tongue felt dry and thick.

"Ever shot one of your friends? You'll like looking at it afterwards."

"I said I was sorry for him," Hutton whispered. He rubbed his hand over his forehead to dry the sweat trickling into his eyes. "I'm sorry for you as well. But I heard him m'self say he was on the other side."

"Give it up, me dear," Marriot said smiling.

"Shut up, can't you?" said Kent. "God, how you babble." Looking into Hutton's face, he spoke slowly. "All you have to do is remove yourself outside for a minute. It'll be my funeral."

Hutton's voice exploded in the room.

"No."

"Damn you, don't bawl." Kent turned his head, and met the general's glance fixed on him, tired, old, ironical.

"He didn't wake me, I've been awake some time," Thorburn said with a little malice.

In silence Kent looked at Marriot. There was now nothing he could say to him. Marriot shook his head slowly: his eyes, astonishingly bright and loving, advised his friend to keep quiet. "Do you expect me to stand about and see you decently murdered?" said Kent.

Still watching him, with the same gentleness, Marriot said, "I'm perfectly all right. I give you my word, there's absolutely nothing you need remember."

Kent turned back to Thorburn. A painful sense of contraction in his throat made speaking difficult; he waited a minute and said coolly,

"If you don't mind my saying so, you've done us in once, by coming here. Need you add this bloody farce to it?"

Thorburn stood up, supporting himself with the back of the chair. An extraordinary air of arrogance, gaiety, almost slyness, made him look fresher.

"You're quite right. I'm not up to dealing out maquis justice." He glanced with careless irony at Marriot. "Nor your sort of political justice, either-my naïve out-of-date principles don't let me sentence a chap for crimes he may be going to commit some time-in fact because he doesn't agree with me. . . . I don't think I have any illusions—we shall certainly come to that, this country is going to be split from top to bottom, as others have been, and poison rubbed in its wounds . . . unless poisons don't take on us. . . . You"he made an amiable gesture towards the other young man-"you mustn't delude yourself. I'm sparing you one ugly memory. No one's likely to do that for you next time you run up against the need to kill one of our own people. . . . And if anyone says it's not more disgusting and ugly to kill one of your own people than a foreigner, he's a damned fool. No sensibility. An ass. If compassion is worth anything at all it's narrow. . . . I'm warning you, my boy-you won't get through this war without doing some abominable things.

If you don't mind my saying so—without guilt. Only thing that will save you from going bad is to know you're guilty. Yes, know it. If you try to comfort yourself, you're lost . . . "

He shambled a few steps about the room, buttoning his jacket, and considered Marriot again, sadly, without much kindness.

"As for you—you young fool. You'll comfort yourself all right. You'll forget the lesson you've just had; you'll tie a bandage round what used to be your wits, and when you begin agreeing to kill poor innocent devils for not having the sort of sentiments you think they ought to have, you'll absolve yourself in the holy name of the people or the revolution or something equally exalted and nebulous . . . God help you."

He turned, and roared at Hutton.

"Come away from that door."

The soldier stepped neatly aside. Marriot had not moved.

"Well?" Thorburn said rather brutally.

Marriot moved his head.

"I'm to go?"

"Yes. Get out."

"It's very good of you-" Marriot began.

Thorburn interrupted him.

"Thank my feebly liberal idea of justice. Or my stomach."

"Thank you all the same," Marriot said with difficulty.

"You might just remember—if it won't sadly inconvenience you—that there used to be a time, and a world, which knew the difference between guilt and innocence. Now get out."

"Oh, sweet Christ," Kent said, "don't hang about. Hop it."

Marriot took a few steps towards the door. He turned and said to Kent,

"Look after yourself."

"I might drop in on you one of these days."

"No," Marriot said. "Don't."

Kent smiled very briefly.

"See who catches who, eh?"

They looked at each other for a minute. Then Marriot went out: he hesitated in the doorway, but without looking back. The greyness outside, mist or the vaporous light before dawn, turned him into a shadow moving through it before it swallowed him.

Kent turned and faced Thorburn. He began a phrase, and was obliged to cough before he could finish it, stuttering. He was nervous: his face jerked, the lines below his eyes had deepened.

"I'm very grateful, sir. If you hadn't helped us, it would have been a poor do," he said. And stopped.

"I'm an old bastard."

"Sorry, sir," Kent said. He was only slightly disconcerted.

"No, you're right. I'm old enough to do out of conviction—out of disgust as well—something you would have done because you're an ignorant young fool. And out of love. Don't look sour. I don't give a damn what you feel or think."

He lumbered as far as the door, filling it with his wrinkled back, and stared out. From the windless half-light a thought came to him: he remembered another war, in another age, and helmeted young men waiting beside him in the same stillness and grey light. As now, the minute had been all, without future. Yet this, now, here, was its future, he thought. To what future is this agony the past? . . . A

shudder in the sea disturbed him, reminding him where he was.

Turning, he looked at Kent and Hutton. Their faces were alike in being closed to him. It was for himself he said, throwing it at them,

"That fellow Breuner is right. We go on living with what we did—we're not cut off."

Was strong enough to suck their colour from the lamps still burning in the room.

Lackland had listened to the general without comment. As he talked, Thorburn rambled about the room, speaking casually, as if he were bored, and scratching himself: his body was irritable with sleeplessness. As soon as he ceased, "You can go," Lackland told Kent.

The young man stepped just outside the door. He stood there, with his back to them. In the strict light, the yellow of the gorse was dimmed as by water. When you cannot see the sky, the night, the limitless night, is small. An immense sky now opened into space, pencil lines and feathers of white cloud floated off into the blue. He listened with half an ear to the dialogue behind him, in the room.

Thorburn said very roughly,

"You should add a line to your report to make it clear that the man was released by me, on my responsibility." "Very good, sir."

With a touch of contempt,

"No doubt it hasn't struck you that he knows nothing more than will very soon be known to everybody, including the enemy. The truth is, we hypnotised ourselves with our good reasons and excellent logic into thinking it necessary to do an abominable thing. As people do much too often."

"You know my opinion, sir."

"I find I can bear your opinion of me very lightly. . . . Come to that, I'm too old, too set in my feeble ways, to live in the future you are preparing."

"I didn't prepare it."

Coldly,

"No. But you'll adapt yourself very nicely. Your feeling about civil war and that young imbecile's are much the same coin. So for that matter are your notions of justice."

"With the slight difference," Lackland said, "in the ways he and I take to meet an invader."

A pause.

"Yes. You are right. But—I'm a selfish old man, I'm thankful to know I shall be dead before killing each other becomes an English habit. Manners of that sort may go down well in a barbarous society; here they're against the grain—enough, at any rate, to humiliate people. And a humiliated people soon dies out—" In a less overbearing voice, "None of us can avoid guilt. This particular guilt happens to be one I won't take. Not on your life."

"Quite," Lackland said, in a tone of cold meditative deference. "Your own, since you'll be out of the country, is not involved."

Thorburn said indifferently,

"I haven't the slightest intention of going to America. Never had."

Startled, Kent turned round to look at him. The general had seated himself again, in a chair just high enough for the padded back to support his neck; he stared at the ceiling, placid, bored.

Very little taken aback, Lackland said,

"May I ask, sir, what you are going to do?"

"No."

"If I might advise-"

Genially,

"You mayn't."

"Very good, sir."

"But I'll give you a spot of advice. At a time when every sort of problem, all of them disagreeable or difficult, hits you day after day, death very soon begins to seem not only the easiest solution of them, but the cleanest. When you reach that point, look out. To get the better of a man by killing him is the second most pleasurable act in the world. Some people, I'm told, find it the first. It's sensible not to give it too much run."

Behind a cool stare, Lackland reflected.

"There are so many ways of killing. The least honest is to persuade people to throw away their arms."

Thorburn smiled tranquilly.

"I daresay. But as one whose business has been killing, I feel that we should kill as seldom as possible." He stopped, and considered Lackland with a cold penetrating shrewdness. "D'you know what—I shouldn't be surprised if one reason you were so anxious to shoot that daft fellow was

annoyance with yourself for talking about your plans without knowing the chaps you were talking to."

After a moment, Lackland said,

"Do you need me, sir?"

"No," said Thorburn kindly, "you can go back to bed." As the door closed, he murmured, "A fine fellow. Too fine by half. Much too fine for me."

He slewed around in his chair, caught the pilot staring at him from the doorway, and said testily,

"Why the hell don't you produce this aeroplane of yours?"

Kent had no answer ready. He watched Thorburn drag himself up and walk heavily out of the room, slamming the door. Kent hesitated. As if a hand were holding it up to the light, the horizon sent a splinter of colour into his eyes. His mind felt amazingly clear; even his body was relaxed, cool, sure of itself and its purpose. To yawn and stretch his arms was like walking into the sea on a hot afternoon. She'll be asleep now, he thought, and if I go in quietly . . . He heard the door open inside the room. Cordelia came in. She had thrown her overcoat round her shoulders, over her pyjamas. He hurried to her, and they came together without speaking; she seemed at this moment so slight and yielding that the thought of separation was ridiculous. Never, he said to himself, never. In its inmost recess, his mind was turning over other words; but he said nothing, only held her and looked down, in the solitude and pain of love, at the deep lightlyclosed eyelids, and the marks below them of anxiety and weariness.

THE SUN AT TEN O'CLOCK IN the morning had a vigour that diminished everything below it: the far hills, the yellow wave of gorse, the runways, the aircraft—no beauty—settled there.

Only to Nicholas did it look formidable enough to carry several persons to the other side of the world. Taking Hutton with him, he examined it for the best part of an hour, too absorbed to say anything, with a stern face. His gravity broke up all at once, into a radiant excitement and joy. He turned a somersault, butted the soldier in the stomach, and rolled himself in the burnt grass. Smith cocked an eye at him and said, "You'll be crying before eleven."

"I shan't," he said excitedly. "Why?"

"Laugh before seven, cry before eleven," answered Smith. The child turned to Hutton.

"Was I laughing before seven?"

"I don't know, I wasn't there."

"Yes, you were, you devil, you were there, you're always there, when I'm asleep you're there. You never go away."

"Don't you let your mother hear you use words," Smith warned him.

"Why?"

"She'll warm you."

"Come on now, love, we'll take a bit of a walk," the young soldier said softly, "we'll find something, maybe a gull's egg."

They were walking off, when Hutton glanced at the building and saw the child's mother beckoning from an upstairs window. He sighed.

"Nay, you must come in now," he said.

Nick looked at him with an astonished frown.

"No."

"Your mother wants you."

"Oh, it doesn't matter."

"It does that," said Hutton. "We must go."

The child's sudden docilities were as unaccountable as his fits of rage. He let Hutton take his hand and they walked slowly together along the runway to the house. As they stepped inside, his father and mother came into the room through the other door. Hutton let go of his hand, and stood, silent and awkward. Seized by a fear that the aeroplane had vanished as soon as he left it, the child ran back to the door; he did not go out, but watched from there, to see that nothing wrong happened. Without knowing why, he had suddenly become uneasy.

Speaking in a low voice to Hutton, Mrs. Heron said,

"I shall never forget your kindness during these days, and how you helped me with Nick."

"Yes, very good of you," said Major Heron kindly. "Hope you'll be all right now."

"Yes, sir," answered Hutton.

"Anything I can do for you?"

"No, sir."

"I've no doubt you'll settle down here better than you would in America. Life's very different over there."

"Yes, sir."

With a warm smile, Mrs. Heron said,

"Things won't be easy here. But, Hutton—you won't forget Nicholas, and I shan't let him forget you."

Looking down, Hutton muttered,

"He'll forget soon enough."

"I'll see that he doesn't."

"Nay, he'd best," Hutton said inaudibly.

"What?" demanded Heron. "What did you say?"

Hutton said nothing, and at this moment Thorburn came in, with Clarke, who was walking easily, without even a limp. The general himself was neater than he had been for days: Hutton had managed to get his uniform from him long enough to brush it, had polished his boots, and laid in front of him a hair-brush Thorburn picked up absently and used. Elizabeth Heron looked at him with love. She was a little afraid of him. He had shown her only affection and kindness; the fear, such as it was, sprang in herself. Deeply, it was a fear of being judged by him—and found not straightforward, not honest, and without the charity he had abundantly: he was generous, arbitrary, overbearing; she respected him and, half without knowing it, hoped he did not "see through me."

"Well, my dear?" he said to her.

"I believe we go very soon," she said, with a smile. "Are you ready."

"Oh, I'm not going," he said carelessly.

"What?"

"I mean I'm not going in the plane. I have m'own plans." Very disturbed, she said,

"But, Harry, I don't understand you. You must. This is frightful."

"Frightful? Nonsense," he said brusquely. "You'll be all right, you and George." He glanced stealthily at Heron, who said nothing. "I'm only sorry I can't give you anything, any money. No use to me here, and no use to you over there. Pity."

Without looking at her husband, Elizabeth asked in a low voice—a voice as seductive as always, and now curiously uncertain,

"Why aren't you coming? Why have you changed your mind?"

Thorburn gave her a shamefaced grin.

"I told that fellow Lackland I never meant to go. It's not true. If the aeroplane had been here waiting I should probably have got into it. Thank God it wasn't—I've had time to reflect on the absurdity of an old fellow like me scampering across the Atlantic to become a charge on—really, I hardly know on what."

"You're not older than many people who have gone. And you had orders."

Thorburn laughed.

"Orders! You mean, I benefited by the order that staff officers, wherever possible, were to go by air. Far too many generals blowing about over there already. Not that I despise generals. By God, I don't despise even brigadiers. All I know is—either Europe, and this country with it, is dead, tired of itself and its graveyards, or it still has the will to be-

gin again—and the curiosity . . . At my age, Elizabeth, one hasn't enough curiosity to make the trouble of carting us into a new world worth it."

He noticed that she did not appeal to her husband: she turned to Clarke.

"You agree with me," she said eagerly, "you think he should come—tell him not to be stubborn."

"But I'm stopping here with him," said Clarke. He sniggered and rolled his eyes. "What d'you think? The boy stood on the burning deck, Whence all but he had fled, Titum-ti-tum-titumpty-tum, we'll take the rest as read . . . What?"

"But you're both impossible," she said, with a gesture of astonishment. Looking for the first time at her husband, she said softly, "George."

He started violently. A look of confused annoyance came on his pale face. Before he could speak, Lackland came in from the airfield, walked directly to him, and asked,

"Well, are you leaving?"

"Of course," drawled Heron.

"Very well, you should be ready now. And the pilot wants to see what you have—in the way of luggage. You can't take much."

There was a brief silence. Elizabeth said quietly,

"We have very little, and none of it matters. I'll bring it down."

She moved towards the door. With awkward haste, Hutton followed her; the child ran to join him, catching up with him in the doorway. After a barely noticeable pause, Heron sauntered after them. Lackland watched him go, and said lightly,

"Just as well he's cutting off. He's one sort of human being—not the only sort—this country will have no use for in future."

Thorburn stared over his head.

"Oh," he said dispassionately, "the future may not be so poverty-stricken as you think."

"Who knows anything?" muttered Clarke. "Let it roll.
. . . It's a fine day. Is that fellow Breuner going over, or isn't he? I don't pretend to fathom the minds of foreigners. He's been walking about all night in the next room. Every time I turned over in bed I heard him. If he goes, that'll be three and a half passengers. Seats for another two. I don't know what you call it, old boy, I call it very satisfactory."

"Yes, very," Thorburn said briefly.

He had seen Kent and the girl pass one of the windows. They came in. On their heels, Smith: he halted in the door-way, and asked Lackland,

"Excuse me, sir, would you mind speaking to Flying-Officer Henderson? He'll come in if you're busy."

"I'll come," Lackland said.

He went off, in a brisk skirmishing way. The moment he had gone, Kent looked at the brigadier and said formally,

"I hear you're not going, either, sir?"

"No," Clarke said. "Too old and too far." He looked slyly at the girl. "Seats going begging, eh? I don't think!"

She smiled at him, but did not speak.

"Is that a fact, sir?" asked Kent.

Clarke looked at him with the menacing eye of an old goat.

"What the devil d'you mean?"

"Oh," said Kent easily, "I wondered whether you might be standing down, as it were."

"Not I!"

"Good." He hesitated, glanced at Thorburn, and said, "I don't know whether Colonel Lackland told you. I'm not going."

Without moving his head, Thorburn could see the girl's face. It was calm and shut: whether out of pride, or simple obedience to an order she had given it, it was unreadable. Unexpectant, she was looking in front of her, through a window all white-hot sky.

"I'm staying here—with the Home Army, not with—" Kent hesitated again, frowned, and said curtly, "I shan't be serving with Colonel Lackland himself."

"H'm, yes, I see," Thorburn said. Comment on anything he saw would be resented. Leave it be, he warned himself; he's been dealt an impossible hand, he must play it.

"Aren't you behaving rather foolishly?" said Clarke.

"Very likely, sir."

"And you?" Thorburn asked Cordelia. "Do you approve?"

She turned and looked at him with an unmoved simplicity.

"Forcing him to come was no good," she said. "I tried it. He agreed to come with me, but it was impossible, I knew at the time it was; he wouldn't be happy there, it's too far off, they don't understand anything yet . . . Their time and ours aren't the same." She frowned at him. "How do people live who run away from their moment? Obviously they do live. But he—but Andrew couldn't."

The general forced himself to say,

"You'll go over, won't you?"

She said quietly, "I shouldn't be any use here—because of the child."

A shadow falling across the doorway became Smith. He asked nobody in particular if the passengers were ready.

"I think so," Cordelia said. "I'll call them."

Smith disappeared.

"Don't move. I'll see about it," said Thorburn. He had an instant of blinding anger. Unreasonable and futile. Why be angry? What, after all, is one young man, one young woman, in an age which has chosen separations, torture, death, as its sign? He moved his ungainly body across the room at an astonishing rate. "And you, too, you fool," he threw at Clarke.

Clarke followed him out of the room.

"I don't forgive them for coming," Cordelia said, "but they're kind."

Kent did not speak. She put her arms round him and said steadily,

"Goodbye in this world, my darling."

"Is there another?" he said with an effort.

She tried, looking at him, to say everything in the few words they had left.

"I don't know. We were only just beginning. From now on, Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief, is what I must say. But you, my dear darling—"

Emil Breuner came in, saw them, murmured, "I am sorry," and turned to go. Half with relief—the lifting from him of an intolerable weight—Kent said,

"Don't go, sir. Passengers for New York this way."

"It is time?" asked Breuner. He laid down each word as if it were unfamiliar and heavy.

A clatter of steps and voices in the corridor-Hutton and the little boy, Thorburn, Elizabeth Heron. Her air of happiness and good-humour was so natural that it deceived everyone except the girl-who, besides, did not look at her, and thought sullenly: What is she afraid of? Of the trip? Of what will happen to her over there? . . . Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder, smiling. Her husband had lagged behind a few steps; he came in with the air of a man who is being taken away in absence of mind, his own mind. He was, she saw, angrily uncomfortable, not quite at ease yet in the part of distinguished exile. Once we are there it will be all right, she thought: it will be an anxiety at first, then a habit; then, for life, his only possible place, the lie he believes. And why shouldn't he go? What sense could there be in staying here, to be killed, his mind, his gifts, the work he can still do, thrown out like a cupful of dirty water? . . . If only, she thought, he behaves decently to Harry now. . . . She saw that this need not worry her: Thorburn knew perfectly well that in staying behind he was being worse than tactless.

"Well, my son?" he said lightly.

Heron dropped his pretence of detachment, and stammered,

"I wish you would come with us."

"I can't, I haven't the courage," Thorburn said simply. "It's too much for me, I'm too old and stiff-necked."

"But-"

"If you don't care for it over there, you won't, unfortu-

nately, be able to come back," Thorburn interrupted. "It can't be helped, and you must remind yourself that you did the only sensible and the right thing." He hesitated very briefly and added, "You'll do very well."

He turned quickly to Breuner.

"Well? Are you going?"

There was a long silence. Watching Breuner, Thorburn noticed at the same time Kent and the girl standing at the back of the room, not trying to talk: they were, he fancied, hand in hand.

"Yes," Breuner said at last. "I will go."

"Excellent," said Thorburn warmly. He wanted to say something friendly, but any words he had would be impertinent and cruel: he held his tongue.

Nicholas had been running, excitedly, but taking care not to make a sound, between Hutton and the door on to the airfield: he stood a minute looking out, returned to stand quietly beside the soldier, ran back to make sure of the aeroplane. All at once he lost patience. Pulling Hutton's arm, he cried,

"Oh, do come. We shall miss it."

His mother looked at him. She was suddenly helpless; she could not protect him from this, and was even a little impatient.

"All you care about, eh?" Thorburn said to him. "But you must let me keep Hutton. I can't do without him."

"No, I can't," Nick said. The colour rushed over his face. "You're coming, aren't you?" he said to Hutton.

"No," Hutton mumbled. "I have to stop here, I can't come with you this time."

The child caught his breath.

"You must-you must. I shall miss you."

"Hutton will come later," his mother said gently, "in another aeroplane."

He did not speak for a moment: then he said under his breath, "No, he won't," and turned away his head. He wept silently, as always. He'll forget it, his mother thought. Hutton lifted him up; he had carried him into the room, now he was carrying him out. With an impassive air, Heron followed them.

As she walked past Cordelia, Mrs. Heron hesitated, looking at her. The girl returned her look with one of unforgiving refusal, and she could only, taking Thorburn's arm to steady herself, hurry after the others. Unkind, she thought; unjust.

Kent spoke to Breuner.

"Keep an eye on my wife for me, will you, sir?"

"Right," Breuner murmured.

He drew back from the doorway to let them pass him. The girl was looking intently—at what? Following her glance, he saw the rock covered with lichen and the one bent tree: she will always see it, he thought. The image of his wife, serene, attentive, clumsy, came between him and it. He walked on blindly. Provided this country keeps its memories, he thought with anguish—and its kindness.

The room, when Clarke came into it from upstairs, was empty. That was what he had hoped. He took one unfeeling look at the group pinned down by the shadow of the aircraft, turned his back on it, and fell into a chair. "Sooner them than me," he muttered. Contentedly, he rubbed his thighs,

stretched his plump bandy legs, and sucked vigorously at his teeth. Grinning suddenly, he exclaimed,

"Got it! . . .

'Speak, Father!' once again he cried,
'If I may yet be gone!'
And but the booming shots replied,
And fast the flames rolled on."

Lackland and Thorburn came in. He looked at his friend with a gleam of irony.

"Didn't feel like seeing them off, did you?"

"I didn't," Thorburn said briefly.

"Well, neither did I. For a different reason. I never say goodbye, it's unlucky."

"What are you going to do?" asked Lackland.

Since the general showed no signs of replying to him, Clarke said genially,

"We're going home, my dear fellow, home. Stockbridge. Ever been there? You must have—you fish, don't you? Must have fished the Test some time. His dad, you know, owned a bit of it. It was me showed him how to tickle trout—his own dad's trout. If we can only get back there, we'll have time perhaps to do something of that before the bolshies cancel us as beastly relics—what?"

The general was thinking:

It's not likely we'll get that far. Damned unlikely. Our probable end, my dear Will, is a common grave somewhere on the way. And what's wrong with that? A common grave of the common English—suit me very well, I shall know who's shoving . . . Amused, he stretched his head back, to feel the sun on his face. . . . Lie doggo until dark, he

thought, then shake out of my unmanageable old bones and the rest of it, and be off . . . He knew the road he would take to reach the village by night: on either side of him, not seen, felt breathing gently in sleep, country that was half downland; a whiff of rotting wood was old Pacey's barn; then the turn of the road to plunge steeply downhill; thick darkness here, splintered by a gleam from the empty windows of a house; the changed feel of the air as he neared the Test, the silence, then a dog barking; and at last the deep narrow stream. Just here he would feel someone walking beside him, talking to him in a low common voice full of burst bubbles of laughter, admonishing, reassuring: We got here, didn't we? . . .

The drumming noise of the engines was louder. He was mildly surprised to see Hutton in the doorway. Shouting above the roar, Lackland asked,

"Have you seen to the truck?"

"Yes, sir. It's waiting."

"Then get my things into it-I'll be round at once."

"I've got them, sir." He glanced at Thorburn.

"Goodbye, my boy. Good luck," Thorburn said.

"Hope you'll be all right, sir," Hutton mumbled.

He went off, his shoulders a little hunched, as though he were walking against rain.

Stretching himself, Thorburn looked at Clarke.

"Our time running out, I think," he said easily. "Time we went."

He noticed the change in the roar of the engine.

"I wonder how far I can take you, sir?" asked Lackland.

Yes, it's off, he thought; they're off. "You can't, we're going to walk," he said brutally. "Very kind of you."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but you can't walk five or six hundred miles. It's impossible. Your uniform alone—"

Thorburn cut him short.

"We'll pick up more suitable clothes somewhere. I can't endure the truck. And what point is there in our hurrying?" He laughed silently. "We have plenty of time."

"I do beg you, sir, to consider that we don't even know—"
"Consider, good cow, consider," said Clarke.

"My dear Lackland, that's quite enough. I'll be damned if I'll be bruised and jolted again in your infernal truck." Mildly ashamed of himself, he added, "In any case, you have quite enough on your plate."

"I'm not worried," said Lackland coolly.

In the inquisitive glance Thorburn turned on him there was a gleam of friendliness.

"You have no doubts about the future, have you?"

"My only doubt is whether I can work it with the human material to my hand."

"Ah—that's the difference between us. One of them. I have every sort of doubt about the future—and very few about the human material. It won't let you shape it as you like, you know, Lackland, sound fellow though you are."

After a moment, Lackland said,

"I had the impression lately that you haven't much opinion of my soundness."

The general's nearly inaudible laughter shook him.

"I didn't say anything more about you than that you're sound. An excellent soldier—better than clever, ambitious, able, as honest as need be. I believe this country always throws up a few chaps like you when it needs them."

"I shall do my best," Lackland said drily.

"I know it. You'll forget one thing, though."

"Oh? What-if I may ask?"

Rubbing energetically at the back of his head,

"The incalculable, my dear Lackland-in short, God."

Fixing his cold glance on the general, at a point he could reach without tilting his head, Lackland retorted,

"And do you think I don't believe in Him?"

Thorburn answered with some humility, even remorse,

"I had no right to imply anything of the kind; my tongue runs away with me sometimes, I really ought to be careful, damn it."

Lackland said nothing. For a minute now, there had been silence outside, in the heat and bright air; the noise of the aircraft, dwindling, had become a barely audible vibration—it ceased. Kent came into the room. They turned to look at him and he said jauntily,

"Well, he's off the ground all right."

"They're safe now, are they?" said Thorburn, with a slight effort.

"I hope so," Kent answered. He turned to Lackland. "Are we off, sir?"

"Thank God, yes," Lackland said, suddenly happy. He looked at Thorburn. "If there's nothing more I can do . . ."

"No," Thorburn said. "Good luck to you."

Lackland saluted and bustled out. The pilot hesitated.

"Goodbye, sir. Thanks for everything," he said, stiffly. Instead of saluting, he held his hand out. A firm clasp of his long fingers—they were cold—and off he went.

Clarke turned his eyes up.

"This music hath a dying fall," he muttered. "Now, where the devil did I pick that up?" "On the wireless, if I know you," his friend said.

"That fellow Lackland—" he hesitated, grinned sharply. "He believes God believes in him. Which may be why he's so damned useful at this moment. If he is."

The sound of the truck came to them from the back of the house. They heard it, as it jolted off, for less than a minute: a turn in the road cut it off. Glancing round the room, Thorburn wondered if anyone would enter it again before the litter of newspapers disintegrated and rats had finished what was left of the food lying about.

"Well?"

"Holidays again, Master Harry," said Clarke, sniggering.
"Come on, you old fool." Smiling, he drove his knee clumsily at the other's backside, all but overbalancing. The silly gesture returned to him from a remote past, together with this warmth in his body that might have been love.

They went out together, blinking as the sun leaped at them. "The boy—O where was he?" sang Clarke. Opening his eyes, the general saw first the rank grass beside a runway, then a gull flying up, up, until it was a speck of radiance in the most enormous sky he had ever seen.

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